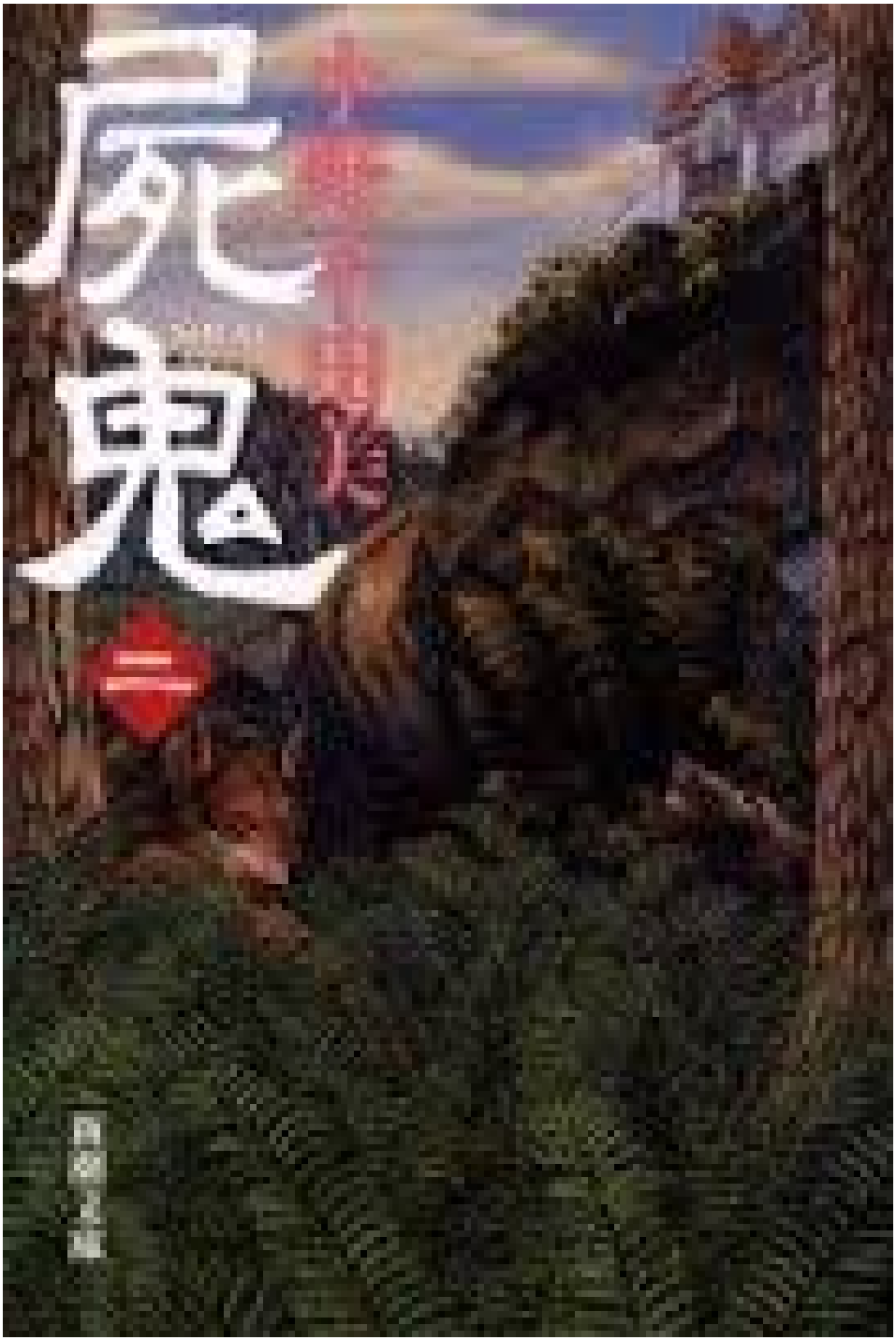
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sinnesspiel

1

When Toshio had suddenly come to pay a visit to Seishin, they were just in the middle of dinner. Like any well known and trusted parish family member, he crossed the garden to poke his face into their living room, pointing to the side with his finger saying "I'll be waiting." As Miwako stood to offer him some tea, he waved her off with a smile saying "Don't mind me."

"I wonder what's the matter, for Toshio-kun to come."

Giving a vague response to Miwako as she tilted her head, Seishin hurriedly finished his meal. He took a small tea kettle, a pot and tea cups from Miwako before returning to his own room. Toshio hadn't gestured to the office but to Seishin's own room, after all.

When he returned to his room, Toshio who had went out on the veranda was gazing out in a daze at the garden. A cooled autumn breeze blew in through the wide open shouji. When he called out to him, he turned with a smile. "As usual, your room's got nothing to it besides the books."

Toshio closed the veranda window, entered the room and closed the shouji. Seishin gave a wry smile. Seishin's room was made up of two six tatami mat spaces but it hadn't been used for anything beyond sleeping for some time now. Even when he came to sleeping, he would often nap in the storage room near the office, so to say that it bad mostly just become an archive for his books was no exaggeration. It went without saying that the shelves were full, but the bed area and even the writing alcove were flooded with books, the futon rolled up, it and the desk and the kotatsu all buried under failed manuscripts copies and printer's proofs.

Toshio leaned against a bookshelf and fingered through one of the nearby catch copies. "It's thought that where a person lives reflects the insides of their psyche. Going with that, your psyche's turned into a storage room. That or you've really abandoned your place and turned it into one."

Seishin knelt before an appropriately sized pile of books and set the teacups on top of it. "It's because I'm usually in the office. --- What is it?"

When Seishin asked, Toshio opened his mouth only to show uncharacteristic hesitation. "Hey... this village is surrounded by death, you said once, huh? No, wrote, should I say?"

"What's this, all of a sudden?"

"Right now in the very present, don't you think that's the state of things?"

Seishin's brows furrowed. "What do you---"

"The village is overflowing with death. Right now, we can't even imagine how many people've been infected by that. It's eating the village from the inside out. So, saying it's surrounded might not be the most fitting word but to me it looks like the village is surrounded. It's slowly becoming more and more obvious."

Toshio cut his words short easily. "I investigate and I investigate, but to me it feels like there's always a wall blocking me off. I'm looking for an exit I can't find, like that. The situation's getting more and more severe. Yet the more I look the more obstacles pile up, like the exit's growing further away. So it's like being surrounded."

Knowing full well that feeling, Seishin nodded.

"What do you think's happening to this village?"

"What, you say?"

Toshio drew his gaze from the catch copy and lifted his face. "I have the feeling I might just know the infection route of the disease.

I think I've found an answer that pulls together all the bunch of details. The disappearances, the moves, the commuters quitting their jobs included."

Seishin found himself leaning forward. "Really?"

"Possibly. ---It's The Risen."

For a moment, Seishin failed to understand the word. "What?"

"Oni. It's vampires."

Seishin blinked. Was Toshio using the words as some kind of simile? Or was this Toshio's idea of a joke?

He looked to Toshio troubled over how he was supposed to take this, but Toshio remained serious.

"Anemia's the first symptom, then it finally culminates in multiple organ failure. In all the patients, what stands out is pale skin and lethargy, a cold sweat, a pulse that's hard to feel, and respiratory failure. Pallor, prostration, perspiration, pulselessness, pumonary insufficiency--5P," Toshio murmured. "Shock from blood loss."

Seishin reflexively nodded. "Toshio----"

Toshio cut him off before he could speak. "And it always starts with anemia. Normocytic normochromic anemia. It's not a problem with forming blood. They've lost a large quantity of them. In this case, normally we'd suspect hemolysis due to blood loss. But, there's no trace of blood loss happening. Even doing a full body CT scan we never discovered any internal bleeding. No outward injuries. Nor bloodstains. So they can't be hemorrhaging. So it has to be hemolysis but the COMBS tests return negative. There's no swollen spleen or abnormally high bilirubin or LDH. Those are what I think of as the characteristic features of hemolysis. But, if it's possible for a form of hemolysis that's unthinkable with common sense, why can't there be a form of blood loss that's outside the bounds of common sense? No external wounds. There's no internal bleeding either but even so the patient is losing blood. Blood is leaking out the blood vessels, with a decrease in the circulating blood. The

result is that anemia occurs but since there isn't any hemolysis, since there isn't anything abnormal with the body itself, there are no conditions seen outside of anemia."

"But."

"But what? But then the organs systematically break down because of an absolute shortage of blood. Primary MODS. The amount of blood decreases even more. All kinds of mediators activate, as if the body's being invaded. SIRS occurs. The lungs are damaged, the alimentary canal hemorhagges, ileus or renal failure starts to occur. Myocardial ischemia occurs, heart function declines, and symptoms of heart failure appear. Secondary MODS. ---Multiple Organ Failure."

"Toshio."

"It's actually textbook. It's just like shock from blood loss. The problem is that without external injuries or bloodstains, and without internal bleeding, that's the end of that line of reasoning. I suspected blood loss. That's why I did a complete internal scan looking for the internal bleed. But, the internal bleeding is never found. I never took external blood loss into account. There were no wounds after all. But at the same time, the patients weren't completely without wounds. Those bumps. Festering like some insect bite. Those were always located near a blood vessel. That's where the patients are losing their blood. To a vampire."

"Toshio, this is bad," Seishin shook his head. "Something's wrong with you."

"Why? This is a medical case. It starts with anemia, ending in MOF so sudden and acute it's unheard of in medical science, with the patient suddenly dying. This is definitely spreading like an epidemic but there's no corresponding Epidemic Disease. It's not just that it's not appropriate to classify as an epidemic disease; clearly there's something wrong. The blood loss can't happen without hemolysis and yet there's no bleeding so there's no hemolysis. The condition deviates from medical common knowledge."

"Even so---"

"If we add a nonsensical existence like vampires to the mix, we can solve the formula. The symptoms conform to it nice and nearly. If we negate the existence of vampires, we preserve a certain breed of consistency in the world itself, but we're still left with a medical case that defies common sense. There's not a huge difference between the two unnatural phenomena, but, now then, which would you choose?"

Seishin had no reply for him.

"That's not all. Ishida-san's gone missing. And with data and a written report on the series of deaths. There's the one-way mass trend of movers. Those movers suddenly going in the middle of the night as if fleeing something, abnormal. At least going by what Koike-san's said, they had an outbreak before they moved. In truth, even if we think of all of the movers as ones with an outbreak, it conforms. Ishida-san didn't exactly move but the part where he suddenly disappeared into the night is the same. It's probably an example of a move---and an irregularity too, don't you think?"

"That's... Certainly," Seishin said unable to disagree.

"But what connection am I saying there is between illness and moving? And those who quit. Those who come down with the disease would want to quit it seems. But at the same time, there can't possibly be a disease that makes people move or quit, can there? Is the pathogen giving orders to the infected? Move! Quit!" Toshio said with a low laugh, before his face became serious again. "---That can't be the case. Pathogens don't have consciousness. But, if there were a pathogen with a will? If the thing infecting them itself, if the main cause itself has a will, and if it was controlling the infected?"

Seishin couldn't give an answer. That kind of thing couldn't possibly happen. Though he wanted to say the obvious, it wouldn't pass his throat.

"It started in Yamairi. It came into the village, the contamination magnified, and all the while the damage has been spreading. It makes anemia occur. The disease gets worse at night. It has a will, and as you can tell by looking at Ishida's case, it chooses its victims arbitrarily. It can control and restrict its victims actions. ---It's vampires. What else could it be?"

Seishin merely wordlessly shook his head. He could neither reply nor find the words. If he could have spoke, the words would have been "They can't exist" but if he expressed that believe it would expose the words "can't" rather than "don't" highlighting it as only a belief.

Toshio breathed a light sigh. Maybe he never expected to be believed from the start; he didn't look like he blamed Seishin.

"I'll be taking the Yasumori missus into the hospital. I'm planning to do a night watch for a while but if you could I want you to swap shifts with me."

Seishin hesitated, then nodded. It wasn't that he believed Toshio by any means. More than being a matter of believing him or not, it was something he honestly wanted to say was too ridiculous and that he wasn't tagging along. But, if Setsuko had an outbreak, he didn't think it was a bad idea to have her hospitalized. If she were being hospitalized, it was important to keep watch to see when it took a sharp turn for the worse. He knew that that was too much for Toshio who was already being worked to the point of exhaustion.

"....All right."

Toshio let out a breath at that again as if something were unburned from his shoulders, then spoke as if suddenly remembering. "Tomorrow, could you go to Mizobe for me?"

"Mizobe? To do what?"

"I need some materials. With the enemy being what it is, medical texts aren't going to be any kind of reference. That said, it's not like I can just go to the Tashiro Book shop like usual and order them."

Seishin faintly sensed a hint of malice.

"Materials... about vampires?"

"That's right," Toshio said dubiously, making Seishin swallow down something bitter.

"If so, I have them.... Right here."

"Eh?"

What a sign. Was there some kind of meaning to this?

"I've been writing. So," Seishin said aware of the feel of goose-flesh chilling down his back. "About The Risen. ...It's called 'Shiki.'"

sinnesspiel

2

"Hello."

Aoi turned about from the TV she had been staring at as Natsuno called out from the porch. From the kitchen were sounds of Aoi's mother cleaning up after dinner.

"Where's Tamocchan?"

"I think he's upstairs. ----Did you go to Masao-kun's wake?"

"No," Natsuno answered. That evening he'd gotten the call from Tamotsu but he didn't have the gall to go to the wake. "Masao wouldn't have been happy even if I want to the funeral, right? More like he'd hate it."

"Because you're so cold like that..."

Maybe, was all Natsuno said as he let himself in and headed upstairs. As he was turning towards the stairway, Shizuko popped her face out of the kitchen.

"Oh my, Natsuno-kun."

"Sorry for intruding," he said without looking back, going towards Tamotsu's room. Tamotsu had thrown himself down over his bed. Unfittingly loud rock music flowed in the room.

"---Yo."

"Lemme watch a movie." Natsuno said, causing Tamotsu to sit up with an exasperated look.

"Hey you, what do you think our house is?"

"A refuge," Natsuno said as much meaning it sincerely but of course Tamotsu probably didn't realize that.

"What, you're fighting with your old man or something?"

"I came to console you. Lemme stay the night tonight. "

"Is that how you act when you're consoling someone?"

Tamotsu sighed but Natsuno didn't reply. He just gave a composed smile.

"So? ---Whassis about a video? You're not going to tell me it's one of *those* kind of "comfort" videos, are you?"

"If you can tell a joke like that, you don't need any consolation," Natsuno laughed. Tamotsu leaned near him, looking at the title of the rental video he pulled from Natsuno's paper bag.

"What the hell is this?" Tamotsu was annoyed. "Even though we've just had a death in the family, you're bringing a horror video of all things over to the house?"

"Would a comedy have been better?"

Tamotsu made a scowl and gave Natsuno a small poke. The truth was that even if he were watching a comedy he didn't feel like laughing, and just thinking about a long saga of love and tears made him feel like sighing. He wasn't really in the mood at all for watching a video with him. But while he thought that, somehow he also felt like being with someone. At any rate, he was thankful to have somebody there for him. They were a distraction for the time being.

If there wasn't something washing through his mind, he'd go nuts. His older brother was dead, Masao---was dead.

The awkward argument on the night of Tohru's wake never was ultimately resolved. And furthermore, Tamotsu thought. Masao's older brother Munetaka had some unpleasant things to say about Masao who didn't come out for Hiromi's wake. It seems his complaints of being unwell were taken as a feigned illness. To be honest, Tamotsu thought so too. Surely he was just sulking as usual. But Masao really was sick---the same as Tohru.

Thinking about it now, he felt bad for Masao. Even though he didn't do anything to deserve being ganged up on with such an abundance of cold thoughts, he couldn't help but think. And even without that, Tohru's death was heavy in his heart. Masao's death was another weight added to that.

If he didn't fill his head with something or other, he was going to be sick with regrets. So right then he was thankful for Natsuno's presence.

As for Natsuno, he watched with deep interest as Tamotsu inspected the titles. One about vampires, one about zombies. He wondered, how will Tamotsu react to this, but he didn't show any particular response. ---If so, well, that was fine.

"I'll go ahead and watch these, so don't mind me." Natsuno said, earning a frustrated sigh from Tamotsu.

"You really just do whatever the hell you want in life, don't you? If you're gonna watch them alone, do it at your own place, I'm telling you."

"At my own place I don't have a TV in my room."
"Watch it with you Dad and Mom."
"Good one."
"You had dinner yet?"

"I haven't. But, don't worry about it. I told your Mom that I'd already eaten."

"Well aren't you considerate. How adult," Tamotsu laughed and left the room. As he went down the stairs, he could hear him calling out to Shizuko.

Natsuno sighed lightly.

What he was sighing about, Natsuno himself didn't know. Was it vampires, was it zombies? "The Risen," calling them that would be most appropriate, he thought. It wasn't something as romantic as what they called a "vampire." The image of Megumi who should have died was outside his window was more savage than that. At the same time, it wasn't something as sinister as a zombie. It was something more

prosaic in nature. That was the impression he had. A dead body that rose up from the grave, an intermediary between life and death. ---That line of thinking was more fitting.

The one outside the window was Megumi. Even though she died and was buried, she rose back up. The deaths continuing throughout the village were very likely connected to the bunch that were rising up. That might have been spreading. If you died by an attack by The Risen, that dead body would also rise.
A chain of death. Somehow it had to be stopped. At least, if he didn't, Natsuno himself would probably be in the chasm of death soon enough. To be honest, these last three days, it was a wonder he was able to stay safe. For tonight he could stay over at Tamotsu's house but it wasn't something he could do forever. He had to take measures to protect himself, and even setting that aside, somebody had to cut the chain.
(Tamocchan didn't have any reaction.)

He didn't show any reaction at all to depictions of vampires or zombies. Tamotsu didn't suspect a thing. He didn't find the series of deaths at all unusual. So Tamotsu probably wouldn't listen to him seriously if he talked about someone visiting his window or about what he was thinking now. In the first place---so Natsuno thought--there wasn't a single person who would listen to him seriously, was there?

(Of course there's not....)

If he didn't personally have somebody taking watch outside his window, he wouldn't be of a mind to take it seriously either.

He couldn't ask anyone for reinforcements. Nor for cooperation. Nobody would safeguard him, nobody would remove the threat. There was nobody who would take up the necessary action in Natsuno's place. And there probably wasn't even anybody who would help out as a sort of joke, half-believing half doubting. As far as people who would tag along just for fun even without believing it---the only one who came to mind was Tohru.

With that thought, Natsuno felt a sharp prickly pain stabbing through his chest. It might have been himself saying that if only Tohru were there. Even while accepting that he wouldn't believe him. That said, Tohru would put on a Big Brotherly face, a face like he was tagging along with his little brother on some idiotic outing, but he would help without a doubt. But---Tohru wasn't here. He was probably snatched away by them. That was why Natsuno had to stand and face this alone.

Losing Tohru got to him deeply. The feeling that he wasn't anywhere anymore. He felt that but at the same time, he felt a terrifying premonition.

(What am I, afraid?)

That might have been the face. Whether he was thinking that they did something to Tohru, or that that was why Tohru wasn't there anymore, realizing there was something fearful looming, he couldn't face it head on.

Essentially, he was alone. He couldn't hope for assistance. Natsuno had to do something by his own hands. But in reality, Natsuno himself didn't know what he should be doing. There was nobody to tell him what to do in such a situation. He had no idea at all how to deal with "The Risen."

What he did know was just that this was extremely abnormal. And by instinct he felt that every abnormality happening in the

village was connected to this. If abnormality colored things, then the deaths, the moves, all of them had the same hue to them.

----And there was one more thing.

Natsuno half heartedly put the video in Tamotsu's VCR deck and turned his eyes towards the window. There was one more thing with that abnormal tint to it. That was that house transferred to the Kanemasa lot.

It was ever since that house---not its inhabitants--had come to the village that strange things were happening.

Death was spreading. There had to be a starting point somewhere. If so, he couldn't think of anything other than that house.The owner rarely made an appearance in town, and when he did it was only at night.

He couldn't say it would all be finished by returning Megumi to the grave. To really be safe---if he wanted to return things to normal, he had to do something about the lot of them.

Just trying to imagine it left him feeling like it was beyond his own abilities but Natsuno had no escape route. Natsuno wasn't naive enough to think the adults would do anything about it.

sinnesspiel

3

The curtain of night had fallen over the mountain path. While ducking his head down into the darkness approaching from all sides, Akira remained there with no determination to leave, keeping hidden in the forest peeing in the direction of the Kirishiki home.

There was a light on in the old stone building. Indeed the more he watched the room filled with light, he had the feeling the one doing something inappropriate was himself, lurking in the darkness.

(But, those guys did something.)

He was confident of that. He didn't have any basis for it, but Akira's instincts told him it was certain. Thinking that, he kept surveillance over them and yet the Kanemasa bunch hadn't shown hide nor tail of themselves. Far from seeing suspicious shadows, he never so much as caught sight of the master in the vicinity nor in the windows. ---That was all the more suspicious, he thought.

It was like he was intentionally hiding himself. And, just maybe that meant you-know-what. That they bunch of them were plotting something. So they had to be real scrupulous about hiding themselves, no doubt they were trying not to make any obvious moves in front of the villagers.

Even though he had nothing but certainty, there was no change, and Akira was starting to feel dumber by the minute. It wasn't that he'd lost any suspicion of them, and he didn't exactly think that sitting out here like this keeping watch was childish but if nothing happened like this then he got the feeling that it seemed like they weren't planning to do anything. Or possibly, he was the problem.

The one to catch the tiger by the tail, to capture them, wouldn't be Akira, maybe that duty would fall to somebody else entirely.

"Tch...."

Akira sighed and adjusted his position in the bushes. He faced the Kirishiki household with a sulk. He could only keep watch from the time he got out of school until dinner, and when his nagging mom wasn't around like today he could come out after dinner too but that wasn't too often. Throughout the day there was no way he could watch them---not from morning until late at night. The one to catch them wouldn't be Akira, but somebody who could watch over them all through the night, won't it, he deeply suspected.

Akira turned his eyes towards his watch. If he didn't get back, his mom would beat him home. If it were up to Akira, he'd rather stay right here and continue to keep watch. But he didn't think his parents would allow him to do something like that and in the first place Akira himself would probably get bored lying in wait all throughout the night. Nevermind if something did happen, since the likelihood of it all failing to pay off was high, he didn't think there was much meaning to staying sitting here and getting yelled at by his parents.

When wavering over whether to return or not, there was a sound from down the slope. Akira quickly ducked down. What came to mind immediately was that it was a wild dog but it was clearly the sound of a human walking. The sound of someone pushing through the underbrush with great strides.

His heart pounded. Something huge might be about to go down, he thought. He kept himself low, holding his breath and peeping through until at last he caught sight of the black outline of a human shape climbing towards him through the indigo blue. Unable to see their face, he couldn't determine anything specific about them. What he could tell was that it was an adult, and probably a man; that was all.

A man was climbing the slope. With sure steps, and from pretty far down the incline. Though his footsteps were so clear, mysteriously he could not hear them breathing. Even though

pushing through the underbrush while climbing the slope would naturally make someone breathe hard.

Someone with a hell of a constitution, Akira thought. That easily tied in to the image of someone who did violent and reckless acts.

Half fearing that something terrible would happen if he was found, half excited, Akira's eyes followed the person. With no signs of minding the slope at all, the man climbed to the top of the slope with steady steps and left the woods.

At some point the moon rose. That's right, he thought. A faint amount of light shone over the shadow coming out of the woods. As expected it was a man, with an incredibly solid build.

The man's feet stopped, then immediately started towards the gate of the Kirishiki house. While looking around, he approached the side entrance door.

(He's making sure there's no one around...)

More and more suspicious, he thought. He didn't know who the guy was but if nothing else he didn't want to be seen coming and going. No doubt it was because he was involved in something shady.

The man pushed the doorbell. While waiting for someone to say something over the intercom, he looked left and right enthusiastically. His feet shifted countless time. It was clear he was irritated and wanted to inside quickly.

Akira faintly leaned his body out from the bush. Wasn't there any way to see their face?

There were footsteps from within the gate. The lock made a distinct click as it was undone and the side door opened. He could hear the one inside and out were saying something but he couldn't make out exactly what. As Akira peeked out just a little more, the man whose back he was facing turned around.

Akira was suddenly frozen in place. He'd thought he'd been found out. The man who turned's face darkened. He couldn't see his eyes

at all. He didn't know where he was looking but he didn't think that their gazes met at least. It might have been fortunate that he'd felt frozen there. The man gave just one more peek behind himself then disappeared inside the side entrance.

Akira held his breath a little longer, then after quite some time let it out. After some time he slipped out of his hiding place. his limbs felt numb.

(Woah....)

He didn't know what it was but he had the feeling he'd witnessed something big. A suspicious man entering the Kirishiki house while trying not to be seen. That might just have been a huge clue.

Akira thought on the man he saw from behind, deep in the woods trying not to make a sound. The shape of his head, his hairdo, the solid and sturby looking line from his head to his shoulder, a white looking shirt, black looking slacks. His posture bending down to whisper to the interphone, and his expression as he turned to look behind himself.

Going parallel to the road still in the woods, Akira tilted his head. He thought that he'd seen that face somewhere before. It was dark and all, he couldn't make out the expression or his features. So he only had the faintest impression but Akira had certainly seen that man somewherebefore. And a lot of times. ---Yeah, it was a face he knew well. For certain.

Looking behindhimself, making sure he was far enough from the Kirishiki house, Akira went out onto the road. He ran down the hill.

Who was it? It was a face of someone he knew well. At least it wasn't someone from the Kirishiki house. It was someone from the village, and someone Akira had seen countless times.

Searching his memory, suddenly, Akira's feet stopped. At the bottom of the hill, the turning point onto the road was right before his eyes. There was nobody on the road. There were lights in the windows of the nearby houses but the light didn't reach him. The

sides of the road covered in forest were dark, and Akira was alone on the slope of the hill.

A chill ran through him from the tips of his toes. Suddenly his pulse raced.

He wasn't sure. ---But.

(....It looked like him.)

And did it ever. The footsteps climbing the slope were all too burly, and that person's timid demeanor was so at odds with that that it took time to make the connection. But thinking back, the features of the one who turned to look back had features far too much like someone Akira knew.

(....But.)

Akira stared fixedly at the street corner. Looking at the house on the corner, the light was glaringly bright and yet Akira's attention was entirely behind himself. His ears, his nose, his skin---really, even with his eyes, he tried to sense behind himself. Was somebody there or not? Somebody---did that person follow after him or not? Was or wasn't there somebody in the surrounding woods? Just like Akira was until a bit ago, hiding themselves?

While concentrating all of his energy behind him, he crossed the distance to the road. Running desperately, how many seconds did it take? How long would it take for somebody lurking in the words---or possibly somebody coming after him now, to capture Akira?

He was too scared to turn around--or even to look too closely at his surroundings. At the height of Akira's indecision, in one go he pounded the ground with his feet. With his final step more like a jump, he went down the hill with full force and speed.

Forgetting even to breath, he came running into the street as if jumping into it, and at last he turned around. There was no sign of anybody on the hill, and no sounds following him through the woods.

Akira took his breath and his body back around. He rushed back

the full distance to his house.

When he saw the light of his house, Akira could all but cry with relief. Without looking behind himself he jumped into the entryway, rushing into the living room with a rush of energy supplied by the relieved tension.

When he came in he saw that his mother who had come out was already back. She looked at Akira was reproach.

"What were you doing? What time do you think it is!" His mother's eyes were worn but Akira couldn't care less. Even while running back, he could only think of what he had to do from now on.

---Right, he'd at least tell Kaori. It was too much for him to handle himself. There was no way he could tell his parents, and his friends were just as out of the question. Probably nobody would believe him.

If it was Kaori, he had a feeling he could convince her. This was relevant to Kaori. Since it was relevant to Megumi.

So Akira hurried Kaori upstairs to the second floor. He wasn't in the mood to listen seriously to his mother's complaints today.

"Kaori, come on!"

"I keep asking, what do you want?"

"Just come on."

Pulling Kaori on to the room, he made sure their mother wasn't following and pulled the sliding door shut. Even so to be extra careful, he had Kaori sit in the corner of the room.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Kaori, I saw something big!"

Kaori tilted her head. Akira was clearly acting weird. He was terribly excited, and yet ghastly pale. He was even shaking. And he

didn't even seem to realize it himself.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. But, was scared." Far from just saying it, Akira certainly looked at his wits end.

"Are you sick or something?"

"That's not it. I saw something big!"

"Saw something?"

"I was watching Kanemasa. I was thinking they're definitely suspicious. Then a guy came climbing the hill. Who do you think it was?" Kaori tilted her head. Akira gripped her arm fiercely. That hand was still shaking. "---It was Yasuyuki Nii-chan!"

Kaori gaped. "What are you saying?"

"It was the Ohtsuka Sawmill's Yasuyuki Nii-chan! I'm absolutely sure of it! He went into Kanemasa. While looking around sneakily."

"Don't say such stupid things!"

"I'm telling you it's true. I saw it!"

"You just mistook someone who looks like him."

"Did not. That's, I didn't see his face real clearly, but it was definitely him!"

"Stop it!" Kaori pried Akira's hand from her. "I don't like them. Don't make up stupid stories!"

"Kaori!"

From downstairs their mother could be heard yelling angrily about something.

With that, Kaori and Akira both hastily closed their mouths. For a while they kept down, making sure that their mother had confirmed they'd quieted down.

"Kaori... it's true. I really saw it. It was definietly Yasuyuki Nii-chan.

Kaori considered Akira's pale face seriously. "But, Yasuyuki Nii-san is..."

Akira nodded. "Dead."

Kaori cowered into herself. "Then, it shouldn't have been Yasuyuki Nii-san."

"But, it was. Yasuyuki Nii-chan rose up. ....He's an Oni, Kaori."

"I can't believe something like that."

"But that's how it is. They're Oni."

They, Kaori repeated. Akira nodded. There was a strange light in his eyes.

"The bunch at Kanemasa. Megumi went up the hill didn't she? And died. She was done in by them. So was Yasuyuki Nii-chan. That's why they rose up."

But that's Kaori started to protest, then stopped. Megumi went up the hill---and Ohtsuka Yasuyuki was at the lumberyard. With Kirishiki Chizuru. He looked embarrassed, with a flustered smile. That was the last time she had seen his smile.

"But that's..."

"It's definitely not a lie. Hey, you come with me."

Kaori sprung up. "Go? Go where?"

"To Kanemasa! If we go there now and keep watch, we might see Yasuyuki Nii-chan come out. If that happens, even you'll know it's not a mistake, right?"

"I don't want to... No!"

"Why?"

"It's already late. ---Yeah, at this house, Mom won't let us out!"

"So we'll sneak out."

"We can't!"

"Kaori, believe me!"

Kaori shook her head. "I believe. I'll at least believe you. But, even so going out too late isn't good. We can't do something that dangerous!"

Akira fell silent at a loss for words.

"I'm scared. ..... No. We can't do it. You can't go either. Okay?"

Akira nodded. His face was already white. "But... in that case, what do we do? Just leave it alone like this? They might attack someone even as we speak, right? If they do that that person will become an Oni and rise up, then the Oni will increase in number, then what happens to us?"

"....But."

"If we tell the adults about this they don't believe us. They'll just think I've gone crazy. I can't tell anyone but you, Kaori. The adults won't get it. That said the teachers won't either. In that case, it's up to us...."

"But, even we can't do anything can we?"

"That's not true. We should be able to do something. ---If we can't, then."

"But still."

"Anyway, come with me. Tomorrow's fine. While it's light out. You won't be scared then, right? I want you to confirm it with me, Kaori. Go on reconnaissance with me. We can't just let this go."

"...But."

"I'm begging you, Nee-chan."

Kaori hesitated, then nodded. Looking at Akira's pale face with his tears rising up, she couldn't do anything but.

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4

Seishin took up his position with Toshio at the nurse station on the second floor of the hospital. Despite not having seen use in some time, there was no color of decay or ruin to be seen. The station was made up of a napping space and a recovery room for post-operative patients' needs to be met separated by a single door.

That recovery room served Yasumori Setsuko. Until just a bit ago her husband Tokujirou was visting her but now that Tokujirou had left, Setsuki seemed to be sleeping peacefully. The recovery room had a large pane glass window in place but there was an old fashioned curtain drawn so that Setsuko herself couldn't be seen. Her outline was only seen like a shadow play upon the screen offset by the lamp.

"Word of her death will definitely come tomorrow..." Toshio murmured, sitting in a chair at the nurse station and opening a book brought from Seishin's room. He was turning the pages but his eyes weren't really on the print. "Of course there are exceptions but the sudden turn in her condition will definitely be tonight, we could say. This patient is going to suddenly get worse tonight. Something is happening at night to make the condition worse."

Seishin sighed but kept his mouth shut. He knew what Toshio was picturing but it was lacking a proper sense of reality. In any case, keeping watch like this would at least satisfy Toshio, so he felt. If Setsuko's condition worsened, that wouldn't be because of something unrealistic, he could see that the cause was something more in line with common sense, and making that clear wasn't bad for the patient in any way.

If---Seishin thought, faintly disturbed.

(If it doesn't get worse....)

If it stayed like this with nothing occurring, if Setsuko's condition didn't worsen... Then Toshio's wild delusions couldn't be dispelled but for the patient it was without a doubt even better than clarifying what it was that was making the condition worse.

"You think that bunch will come all the way to the hospital?" Toshio asked, causing Seishin to smile wryly and shake his head. He meant that there shouldn't be anything coming to visit Setsuko n the night but Toshio seemed to take it to mean something different.

"---Yeah, you're right. I had Setsuko-san hospitalized during the daytime. As long as they're not clairvoyant, they shouldn't know that she was moved here from her home." Toshio said with a fleeting glance to Seishin. "You're still making a face like you don't believe me."

"It'd be impossible

to

believe you," Seishin said with a bitter smile. He talked over Toshio who had started to say "Now listen," as if he found that answer unexpected. "I know what you're trying to say, Toshio. There's a disease that's thought to be spreading, and this disease has some medically strange features, is what it comes down to, right? If we think of the existence of something that defies common sense, then we preserve consistency and common sense as it pertains to diseases but we lose consistency and common sense for the world at large. ---I know what you're saying. But, I'm a layman. That this disease is strange, just how strange it is doesn't click with me. I don't see it as a phenomenon so strange that we need to rely on some preposterous existence like vampires to explain it."

Toshio thrust a finger out at Seishin. "That's right, you're a layman. And here I am, and I'm at least in theory a doctor, aren't I? And I as a doctor am telling you that it's strange. You can't have faith in that?"

Seishin smiled wryly and shook his head. "Not sincerely enough

to swallow the story on your authority."

"Honestly," Toshio said clicking his tongue. "Yeah, I'm just what I look like, a country doctor with no potential for moving up in the world. I'm not a researcher, nor am I a blood disease specialist. So there're things I don't know. But, things I don't know and things thatI can't get an answer to aren't the same thing."

Saying that, Toshio thrust a mug out towards him. Seishin took that, filled it with coffee from the coffee maker brought from Toshio's room and returned it to him. "You can't get an answer? Really?"

"What else would you call having eliminated all the possibilities?"

"Can you really say 'all' definitively?"

"Seems you think I'm incredibly incompetent, huh?"

Seishin sighed. "I get it. This is clearly abnormal, isn't it? And spreading. It starts with anemia---" Seishin started to say, then tilted his head. "Normally, in the case of being attacked by a vampire, wouldn't the cause of death be blood loss?"

"If it's in a horror movie. They lose all their blood without a drop left, they say, but. ---But, I wonder about that, if you're thinking about it as a real world problem." Toshio brought the mug to his mouth. "Just what is a vampire anyway? Are they a group that doesn't have a body like ghosts, or do they have a body of some type or other? The village folklore "Oni" have the risen corpses of the dead. If we go by that, then a vampire's body would be structurally not too different from a human's."

"Aa."

"A person's blood volume is approximately eight percent of their body weight. If they're a full grown man weighing 70 kg, their total blood volume would be about 5,600 milliliters. Another way is to estimate 70 milliliters per kilogram. In that case it'd be 4900 milliliters. It's easier to round that to about 5 liters but that's five

one liter packs? Like they can suck in that much in one go. By the way, even in patients with severe stomach dilation, the most the stomach can hold is 4 liters, but."

Is that right, Seishin murmured. Certainly, he didn't think that the folklore about the body being drained of blood without a drop left was very realistic.

"But death by blood loss isn't something that only happens when all of the blood has been lost, is it?"

"Of course not. I can't say precisely how much blood you can lose before you die but if you lose about fifty percent of your circulating blood, the heart will stop. If you think of the full blood volume as 5 liters, that's 2.5 liters. Even if that's half, that's a lot of blood."

"...Certainly."

"Thinking about the cases up to now, it's not like they've been taking their victims in one go. People who've lost 20 percent of their circulating blood would present with signs of shock but with this disease there's only enough time for anemia to present. If the blood volume is 5 liters, twenty percent would be one liter. One time doesn't mean one liter. At most it's 500 milliliters, or maybe less---" Toshio gave a faintly cynical smile as he held out the mug. "They have about two of these for a meal, in other words."

Seishin drank down the bitterness. Two cups worth of blood; the image brought forth an unexpectedly raw sense of disgust.

"If we estimate one time being about this much blood, by a simple calculation, by the second attack they fall into shock. On the fifth attack, the heart stops, is what it'd come down to."

"Several times...."

"Not bad. In reality, it's probably not that simple, but. --- Immediately after the first attack, red blood cells and extracellular fluid shift from extravascular to intravascular. Blood cells made by the bone marrow compensate for the lost blood. Living beings have faculties to manage blood loss. The blood gets deluded, and since

the immature blood cells are released early, reticulocytes that can't carry as much oxygen are high. So anemic tendicies would appear but for the time being the body's fixed the problem. If this were the only attack, then the victim certainly wouldn't die."

"But, the attacks continue....?"

"They continue. By the second or third time, the body's management capacities are past their limit. If it goes past that, then they go into full-blown oxygen deficiency. The cells are screaming. Mediators are activated to save them. That causes the blood vessel permiability to rise, and water leaks from blood vessels in between cells. Even under normal circumstances, the insufficient blood count would become even lower. With the water content decreased, the blood becomes more concentrated, and at a glance it may even seem like the anemia's abating but the activated white blood cells attach to the blood vessels easily. Neutrophils start to migrate, consuming anything they can make contact with. The body goes into panic as a defense mechanism, and as a result of the defense system activating, the body starts to harm itself. Once this happens, it gets worse, building momentum like it's rolling down a hill. Once the waterline's crossed, the body will destroy itself even if they're not attacked again."

"To a certain extent the defense mechanisms sustain the patient, past that certain extent the defense mechanisms accelerate the damage to the patient...."

"That's what it comes down to. Whether it sustains them or quickens it, it's plus or minus zero; after a certain number of attacks it's a sure out. Within a few days of the outbreak. ....The balance sheets even out."

Seishin wordlessly shook his head. Not caring about that, Toshio continued.

"Once the defense mechanism runs wild, if there's something wrong with the body, it would strike directly at that. The fight would be over that quickly. After that it's a mater of luck. In any case, it gropes around trying to attack the problem. ----Multiple Organ Failure."

"I can't accept that," Seishin said, Toshio raising a brow as if it were an unexpected answer.

"Why?"

"I'll accept that the balance sheets even out. But, between the numerous attacks, why does the victim stay quiet? Never mind the last stages of the attacks, at first aside from the anemia, they aren't that gravely injured by any means. If someone who was supposed to be dead attacked you, why wouldn't you bring that up?"

Toshio made a grimace. "That's a weak spot for you to poke at in this. But, they can't say it---or rather, there's probably something not letting them say it. The obvious affects of the patients with an outbreak are anemia and blunted emotions. Trying to make communication with them is abnormally difficult. Thinking about it now, it was too early for them to have altered consciousness. Never mind if they were in the more advanced stages of shock, that their consciousness would be that low with just anemia is strange. They're doing something. That's the only thing I can think of."

"But---"

"It might be like some insects do, injecting a drug-like substance when they're sucking blood. Even if that's not it, they can make their victims act according to their will. It'll be strange if they can't. Of the victims, every single one of them without exception quit their jobs just before death. Without a doubt the person themselves quit but why did any of them do such a thing? I can't think it was their own will. Of course they're making them do it."

Seishin was silent. Did the classic vampire lore have anything to it like that? The attacked victims moving according to the vampire's will. To come to the very window still if called, away from all protection.

"They use the bunch they attack as their own personal puppets. If that's not it, then the consistent behavior doesn't make sense, and that's why they leave their victims alive."

"Leave them alive?"

"Isn't that what they're doing? I don't know just how much blood they're really sucking per attack but if we assume they're doing it at least more than once, they're not draining to the point of heart failure in one go, are they? Is that because they don't want it to look suspicious, or because they want to use them while they can be puppeteered, or maybe a little of both. In any case, they don't killing their victims."

"Whatever the case is," Toshio said idly picking at the medical charts. "The symptoms are incredibly consistent. After the first attack, the patient isn't aware of anything. The people around them don't notice it either. At most, their emotions become blunted, they're hard to communicate with, and so because of that there's a washed out feeling to them, like they're being plugged up but no particular symptoms appear. ---Ah, they might be thirsty and want water, or something like that. Since they're compensating for the reduction in circulating blood."

"If the attacks continue, their blood is diluted and anemia occurs?"

"That's what it comes down to. Likely, even if a blood test was done directly after an attack, it wouldn't show anemia. Since it's the blood volume itself being decreased, there wouldn't be a change in the hemoglobin per unit volume. Since the ratio compared to the red blood cells shouldn't change. But all the same, since the volume of circulating blood is decreased, the living organism tries to maintain this by starting to supplement it with extracellular fluid. Since the blood becomes diluted, the blood cell count per volume lowers. But since the reticulocytes are increasing, the blood volume---not just the hematocrit, but the hemoglobin values are down. The patient clearly shows anemia."

"And in the meantime, the defense mechanisms can't keep up? So circulatory failure occurs."

"Right. Since the heart rate falls, the pulse and blood pressure decrease. If you try to take a pulse, it's weak and hard to feel. It looks like their level of consciousness has fallen because of the

brain also becoming ischemic. Since there's not enough blood flow to the kidneys, less urine is produced, and sometimes BUN levels rise."

"BUN?"

"Blood uea nitrogen. Amino acids in tissues and proteins are deaminated in the body. Ammonia is produced as a result but it's synthesized into uremia in the liver. Urea released into the blood is filtered by the kidneys but a part of it is reabsorbed. Not all of the water filtered through the kidneys is released as urine. Reabsorption occurs but if the body is suffering dehydration at this point, with the body trying to make up for the shortage of moisture, it reabsorbs too much."

"Ah---so if the circulating blood volume decreases, they'll also fall into a state of dehydration."

"That's what it means. When it's reabsorbed, the urea is also reabsorbed, so the urea levels in the blood rise. This amount of urea will also increase when the kidney's ability to filtrate is weakened. So BUN is one important took for measuring kidney function but when reabsorbtion is spurred on, creatinine levels don't rise. Creatinine is another thing the body needs that it generates inside of itself. Just like urea, it's filtered out by the kidneys to be expelled but unlike urea creatinine isn't reabsorbed. So reabsorbed creatinine levels don't rise. They only rise when the kidney's filtration functions are failing."

Toshio had noticed it right away. Creatinine wasn't rising, only the BUN was. He'd thought this was because of the decrease in circulating blood volume but he couldn't find the all important spot where the blood was being lost at.

"Anyway, with this summer being as hot as it was and all..." Toshio said with self-derision. "I figured it was due to evaporation. They had cotton mouth after all and I couldn't find any traces of internal bleeding. Then after that kidney function declined. This was a sign of MOF but actually I thought tht it was more strange that creatinine levels weren't higher. Was it just an odd matter of

timing when the levels were in flux? Originally, in order to get a grasp on the real state of the kidney functions, we'd conduct a creatinine clearance test. We'd collect a day's worth of urine, then compare the creatinine values in the blood and the urine. If they were in-patients, we'd have tried it right away. But, since I couldn't hospitalize the patients, there wasn't enough time to try the clearance."

Seishin remained quiet and listened. Toshio didn't like to make excuses like this. It wasn't that he wanted to make excuses now, and he couldn't go without speaking out and saying how much he regretted it even now.

"The blood is diluted and anemia appears. The organs experience oxygen shortages, and compensation mechanisms are activated. In order to maintain blood pressure, sympathetic nerves are strained. Respiration and pulse increase and the blood vessels constrict. Because of that cutaneous respiration causes the external temperature to fall, with a distinct difference between internal and external temperatures. The limbs feel abnormally cold, and a cold sweat often breaks out. Blood is centering on the insides. The blood is partitioned out to the vital organs. Because of that, blood shortages to less vital organs becomes even more prominent. So, the face and limbs become pale. ---By this point, the people around them finally start to notice. Their color is poor, their breathing is hectic, and because of the stress on the sympathetic nervous system, the digestive organs aren't getting enough blood and they have no appetite. It's like they're tired, worn out. They wonder if they're worn down or if they've caught a cold."

Seishin couldn't help nodding. Indeed that was the nature of the disease that, ever since summer, had been carrying on throughout the village.

"But, since those symptoms are trifling enough, the people around them ignore it thinking they can sleep it off. In the mean time, they give them cold medicine, thinking having them sleep is the most they can do. But the situation becomes even worse. The anemia gets worse. With the decreased blood flow and lowered hemoglobin levels, the cells become oxygen deprived. Saturated oxygen levels fall. Because of that, the body switches to anaerobic metabolism.

Excessive lactic acid is formed, the pH level of the blood falls, and since the body's unable to produce bicarbonate ions metabolic acidosis occurs. If this goes on, arrhythmia occurs, blood pressure drops, and their level of consciousness is effected."

"Oh...."

"Essentially, if there is metabolic acidosis, you'll know as soon as you do a blood agent analysis, and if you do a medical examination you'll know it's what caused their cardiac stroke volume to decrease. But, at the same time as this, microphage and other parts of the complement system activate, cytokines are induced and neutrophil is activated. The capillary walls here and there start to take damage. The respiratory organs are no exception and this is when lung failure presents. With lung functioning damaged, respiratory acidosis occurs. Once you end up knowing how it works it's all clear but when you don't know what's happening, you just end up lost on what could be causing the acidosis."

"The cause and the effect become muddled."

"Right. Anyway, something's wrong, so the body's trying to somehow defend against it. All kinds of mediators are activated but with the causes and effects muddled, the body itself doesn't know how or what to rescue itself from. It tries to take defensive action against anything it can reach and starts invading the tissues. ---SIRS. The body is clattering apart inside itself. Blood vessel permeability rises, moisture flows from the vessels to the cells. With the cells being invaded, the capillaries are getting damaged one after another. The platelets form together and decrease. Lung injury, renal failure, ischemia of the heart lead to reduced heart function. From there it devolves to cardiogenic shock, and with the decrease in blood platelets, the blood clotting factor activates, which is like a direct hit to the coronary arteries. In other words, because of that blood clotting agent, fibronolysis is activated, and extreme hemorrhaging can start to occur. The body completely loses its ability to maintain itself. As a result,"

"---MOF."

Toshio nodded.

"Once SIRS starts to occur, even I don't know what's happening what to where. What I do know is that everything everywhere goes bad. Even getting test results back, with the toll it's taking on the body telling cause in cause and effect is difficult."

"Like when it's metabolic acidosis or respiratory acidosis?"

"Right. So you can't help trying a symptomatic approach but by the time the patient shows up they're already being carried in, and on top of all of this, with one attack after another, the condition worsens so quickly you can't even think to combat it before it becomes irreversible." Honestly, Toshio mumbled with a huge sigh. "...There's not a damn thing I can do."

Seishin remained silent. He couldn't think of any words appropriate to offer to Toshio's sense of helplessness.

"If only I'd given the relevant treatments sooner. Full blood transfusions, or Ringer's solution transfusions, just something to compensate for the circulating blood volume, something to stabilize it before the defense system started running wild, and keep it that way. To say it another way, that was the only treatment worth giving. Actually, there were results from the full blood transfusion. Out of all the methods tried, that was in fact the only one that had any effect at all...."

For a time, silence filled the nurse's station. Toshio remained sullen, staring fixedly at the single bed. From the recovery room itself there was no presence nor sound.

"Anyway, I think I know the way to handle this. Since there is a case of it being effective, I'll assume it will be from here on, too. But, the Gyouda's Baa-san still died even with that. You could say she held up well for her age but even so, it only held her out for another one or two days. If they aren't cut off from the attacks then there's no way for them to recover."

"And that's why you had Setsuko-san hospitalized?"

Toshio nodded.

"That's right. I pestered the contracting firm during the daytime to have her brought in. The thing attacking Setsuko-san will probably lose sight of her. And to begin with," Toshio said, sounding bitterly pained. "Even if she were taken to Mizobe's hospitals, there are cases that couldn't be saved. Mikiyasu is the main example of that. An ambulance was called to take him to the National Hospital in the middle of the day but in the end he still died. It's possible he was already in a state where there was nothing that could be done for him but it's also possible that wasn't the case."

"There's the possibility that they followed Mikiyasu as far as the National Hospital. In that case, they will come here." Seishin turned his eyes to the recovery room door without thinking. The building was neither silent nor was there sound, beyond that of the Momi firs swaying in the wind. That noise managed to sneak even into the building, with nothing to muffle the sound leaving it to echo as if amplified within here. "Did you lock up?"

It wasn't as if he particularly believed Toshio's excuses but Seishin couldn't help but ask that.

"I did, naturally. And not just for today. We've got strong drugs in here. I don't usually confirm that the main wing's locked up or anything, but the hospital itself is completely locked down. There are the iron bar lattices installed in the parts that would be easy to overlook, too." Saying that, Toshio's gaze went to the recovery room. "Just like the room over there, there are a lot of rooms where the windows don't open enough for anybody to get in."

Seishin nodded. The recovery room had a window but the glass window only pivoted so far to open in either direction, and it was probably impossible for a person to fit through it. ---But, Seishin thought. It was probably the same in the hospital in Mizobe. If it was an inpatient facility, it also had to be locked up tightly, and during that period they must have had somebody doing night rounds as well, so it shouldn't have been easy to sneak in. If there were something that followed after Mikiyasu, didn't that mean that that something was able to attack even in an environment just like this?

Seishin had thought that far when, aware of his own unease, he realized that at some point he had presupposed accepting the existence of an attacker. Disturbed by that, he looked up only to find Toshio looking at him knowingly. Seishin let out a sigh, but what it was towards, he himself didn't know.

Toshio gave a faint smile and stood, peeking into the recovery room next door. Setsuko was sleeping. It was a quiet night, with no abnormalities or changes.

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Chapter Links
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No cultural notes again.

Do you guys want medical notes, or is it explained clearly enough in the text?

Here's a list of what's up and coming besides more translations:

Name translation post

Character map update, with per-book statuses.

Proofreads. They're finished up through Book 1, Chapter 3 right now.

Summaries will come after each proof reading.

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1

"Not bad." That was what Toshio said to Seishin first thing in the morning as they entered the recovery room and looked at the monitor. "Her condition's stable. At least she didn't get worse."

Seishin nodded. To this point all deaths had been annoucned at daybreak. It was likely it did worsen at night. That she made it through the night was no doubt good news for Yasumori Setsuko. The problem was--Seishin thought. What was the cause of that?

Last night nothing particularly out of the ordinary had happened. Not a single strange thing occurred but that might have been the very reason Setsuko's condition was stable. Neither Toshio nor Seishin had the means to test whether that was the case or not.

Setsuko was still sound asleep. Her breath in sleep was restful, her sleeping face at ease. Toshio tried to speak with her but she showed no sign of opening her eyes.

"Oh my, Ricchan, good morning."

As Ritsuko opened the side entrance, Kiyomi was just coming down the back stairway used by staff members. She had a tray in hand. On the tray was assembled a meal for the hospitalized patient.

"Good morning. Is that Setsuko-san's meal?"

"It looks like she isn't feeling up to eating yet, though."

"How is Setsuko-san?"

"There's no change from yesterday but her vital signs are stable. Perhaps it was best to have her hospitalized."

Is that so, Ritsuko murmured entering the locker room. Yasuyuo was changing into the white uniform. It was nothing to make Ritsuko and the others stay overnight for, Toshio said. Since there's no need for a night shift, I'll just ask you to take turns preparing the meals, he said.

"Yasuyo-san, do you think it's really all right for us not to work the night?"

"Isn't it fine? The doctor said we didn't need to."

"That is true, isn't it?"

Ritsuko nodded but remained unconvinced, and Yasuyo too seemed to have an uncertain expression. In the end Toshio himself did end up looking after her but that didn't decrease Toshio's burden. Eventually it would, so it was said but even without that between running out for house calls and looking over hospitalized patients, Toshio couldn't have much time to sleep.

In truth, at the morning meeting, Toshio was acting terribly sleepy. There was no particular report on Yasumori Setsuko's progress. When Mutou asked about her condition, he only answered that she was stable.

Before noon a patient with the disease had come in. Ritsuko could now recognize it at a glance. To the point where she didn't even need to interview them. That strangely flaccid expression, eyes that looked possessed. Toshio examined them appropriately, confirmed that their condition wasn't pressing, and made an appointment for them the next day while sending them off. Ritsuko tilted her head. Usually, he would have certainly ordered a chest and stomach X-ray, yet why wasn't Toshio ordering that?

"Uhm... Doctor, the XP?"

Ritsuko said, but Toshio said it was fine. Indeed, while the disease had gotten worse, the X-rays had yet to confirm an internal

bleed. It might have been useless. Toshio might have decided that it wasn't internal bleeding himself. But Ritsuko couldn't help but tilt her head at him ceasing to do the usual tests without explanation.

"I wonder if the doctor hasn't given up?"

The one to say that during lunch was Satoko.

"It can't be," Kiyomi laughed. "He's not that kind of person."

"But he's doing fewer tests."

"With as many cases as he has, the plan isn't to investigate any more is it? With Setsuko-san hospitalized, he's focusing on treatment and how it progresses. Indeed, Setsuko-san's condition is stable."

"It's good if that's all it is," Yasuyo sighed. "But, well, we can't help nitpicking. Shouldn't we say something?"

Satoko nodded in agreement. That was when Towada who had gone out to eat returned to the break room.

"Welcome back."

"I'm back. ---Say, I heard a strange rumor at creole, but."

"A strange rumor?"

"Yes. So, Kanemasa's---Kirishiki-san? There's talk that he has his own doctor, isn't there? He was called Ebuchi, was it?"

"Was that the name I'd heard? And?"

"In Kami-Sotoba---Uhhm, along the national highway, there was an open lot next to the Kusunoki Gas Stand, wasn't there? The convenience store lot."

"Ah, there was one of those, wasn't there?"

Ritsuko nodded. The convenience store first came to the village about two years ago, and while Ritsuko and others had used it and

found it quite convenient, half a year passed and it closed, perhaps not making enough profit.

"It seems a bit ago some construction started out there. It seems to be being remodeled. A Mizobe construction company had come in, see, there's a sign board or some such. The board with what's being built written on it."

"Ah, one of those."

"And they said that Ebuchi Clinic is written on there."

Ritsuko blinked.

"That's---then, perhaps the Kanemasa's doctor is opening a clinic after all?"

"Isn't he, they were saying at Creole, all worked up over whether the Junior Doctor knows or not."

Yasuyo made a sullen face. "He's not really the type to say something is his territory, but. Certainly, it is rude not to say anything about it to the doctor."

"Isn't it, though?"

"Isn't it good?" Kiyomi threw in casually. "If the patients get spread out a little more, that will help us out, too."

That's right, Yuki nodded.

"But does Ebuchi-san know the situation in the village, I wonder? If he goes into business without knowing, isn't that kind of dangerous?"

"To go all this time without a word to the Junior Doctor, he really shouldn't have. If he'd said something to him, the doctor would have said something then."

Ritsuko faintly furrowed her brows. She thought that it was dangerous for a doctor to open business without knowing there was an epidemic spreading through the village. That said, at this stage

could Toshio casually throw that out there? Nobody but the staff knew yet. If he carelessly notified him, it would flow out into the village. Even without that, the people of the village seemed to suspect something.

"Wonder if he planned to do that from the start," Mutou said tilting his head. "---I mean, just, that Ebuchi doctor or whatever he's called. Maybe he moved all the way out here thinking to run a clinig."

Yasuyo had a dower face as she replied "Beats me. If not, he might have seen that there are an awful lot of sick folks about and gotten the idea. In either case, when she hears about this, the Madame is going to explode, no doubt. Before that happens, it might be good to let the Junior Doctor hear about it first."

That's true, said Kiyomi with a sigh.

"---Ebuchi-san is?"

When Yasuyo told him, Toshio's eyes widened.

"So it seems! Ebuchi Clinic is written on it, but I suppose there's also the chance that it's a different Ebuchi from the one at Kirishiki-san's place."

Toshio groaned. "There's no chance of that. That's way too much of a coincidence."

"It might be good to pass on a word to him about the disease in question, don't you think?"

That's right, Toshio answered but he didn't seem to take it too seriously. Seeing that demeanor of his, Yasuyo started to feel the unease that Satoko had expressed.

"Doctor, how are matters with Setsuko-san?"

"How? Not bad."

"Not like that. Have you decided on a definitive treatment plan?"

"Not particularly, but. ---Why?"

"Everyone is worried about you, Doctor. Suddenly having her hospitalized. And on top of that, the doctor being the only one on duty is too much, isn't it? And on top of that, pulling the Junior Monk into things too. You aren't having him perform medical procedures are you?"

"There's no way I'd have him do them," Toshio said as if it were unthinkable. "Do you really have that little faith in me?"

"It's because you aren't acting as faithfully as you would on an ordinary day. If that's not the case it's fine, but it's still strange to have him around, isn't it? Sato-chan was worried you know. Asking why you weren't having us help but are having the Junior Monk help."

"Ah... that's, not because it's like that."

Yasuyo peered up at Toshio. "Doctor, you've had fewer tests run, haven't you? It looks like you aren't being very consistent, to us."

Toshio tilted his head and gave a vague nod. "Ah... is that it. Mm, yeah, I have."

"So, what is it?" Yasuyo asked, though Toshio dodged the question.

"I can't really say yet. It's a matter of intuition. Yasuyo-san, calm everyone down for me somehow. I'll explain it as soon as I can explain it."

"You'd best be serious?"

"I am serious," Toshio said, half begging her. "And, about the Ebuchi Clinic thing?"

"Don't speak of it to the Madame, am I right?"

"Mm. It'll eventually get around to her but I'd be thankful if we can hold that off. Until the construction's done would be nice, but. If we don't, she won't be able to help talking about stopping the

construction."

Yasuyo sighed. "Yes, yes. I know all too well."

"Sorry for the trouble."

Yasuyo let out another exaggerated sigh and left for the waiting room. Toshio let out a similar sigh.

Anyway, when it came time for lunch he returned to the house. His gait was unsteady due to lack of sleep. Dragging his feet along towards the living room, he saw an unusual face.

"---Kyouko."

Oh my, said Kyouko turning around to face him. His state was clear to see. "Well, you really do look tired, don't you!"

"What's wrong, for you to be here?"

"Mother-in-Law called for me," Kyouko said, sitting on the sofa and crossing her legs. "Saying that you were saying for me to come back."

"---That I was?"

Toshio turned towards the dining room. He could hear Takae making lunch preparations.

"Lately, I've been completely exhausted at work, she should at least be here at times like this, you were, raging, she said. Close up the shop and come back, she said, and so threateningly, too, so I did!"

Toshio threw himself down onto the sofa in frustration. It was true he was completely exhausted but that was all the more reason not to want Kyouko in the house. In the middle of a crisis like this, just thinking of trying to interpose himself between Kyouko and Takae made him feel depressed.

"....Go on back. I don't really need you here. Even if you're here I can't fuss over you. It's really busy."

"Looks like it," Kyouko said with a bitter sigh. "But even so, it's not like I can just turn around and go right back, is it? I mean, I hung the sign out at the shop! Saying it'd be closed a while."

Toshio groaned. "See how my mother's mood is, then you can leave when it's appropriate"

"I'd do that even without your say-so."

sinnesspiel

2

Natsuno stayed at Tamotsu's house until morning, going from there to school. He'd thought since it was a Saturday and thus a half day that he could manage but in the end he slept through most of class. He returned home and threw down his bad. ---What would he do tonight? Did he not really have any choices besides rushing off to Tamotsu's house?

While thinking, he changed clothes. As he slid his hands into his jeans pocket absently, his fingers touched a stray scrap of paper. It was a small portion of the postcard.

Natsuno turned that scrap over in his fingers numerous times. It was half triangle shaped with one side being two centimeters. Yesterday, what was left of the post card he had scattered outside of the window were this piece and three smaller ones. A white scrap between the weeds.

Who was it that sent this? Megumi was the one who wrote it. On the scrap there was just barely the left scrap of the character for Megumi left. But Megumi couldn't have mailed it. She shouldn't have been able to.

For some reason or other, Natsuno remembered the girl he'd met at Megumi's funeral. She had something to give him, didn't she say? He didn't asp what it was but it was possible that what she wanted to give him him could have been this, he realized.

(What was she called....)

He had a feeling he'd heard her name, but he couldn't remember. Her face wasn't clear in his mind either. All he had was that he didn't think he'd seen her at school. He thought she had been

wearing the middle school uniform. If she was Megumi's friend, she was probably a childhood friend from Sotoba, or if not that possibly a relative.

While annoyed with himself for not remembering her name, Natsuno dropped the scrap into the trash can. He locked the bedroom window, pulled the curtain closed and left.

He had a feeling it was Megumi. It was just intuition, but he couldn't help feeling it. That somebody had gathered up the pieces of the postcard that had vanished meant it had to be her, didn't it?

There was a part of him resolute that it was Megumi but on the other hand there was a part of him grounded in common sense that said that that couldn't be. Megumi was the only one it shouldn't have been able to be. That was because Megumi had (gotten out of Sotoba....) died.

Walking while being drug waveringly between each of those thoughts, he saw a group in black on the road ahead. Another funeral, he thought, when sighting a face he recognized in the procession. It was Murasako Munetaka. Then, Natsuno thought with a complicated mix of emotion, watching the coffin they carried off. It must have been Masao inside of it.

He didn't have any obligation to attend the wake or the funeral. Masao himself wouldn't have wanted him to. At the very least he couldn't consent himself to attending the funeral at this point. He wasn't mourning Masao's death. That was a ceremony to grieve Masao's death, so, he felt, he wasn't qualified to attend. He wouldn't forgive himself for being hypocritical enough to act like he was grieving to participate in his funeral.

Wordlessly seeing the procession off, Natsuno turned back. Just walking in order to distance himself from the funeral procession, before Natsuno knew it he had come to the hill that stretched up to the Kanemasa lot. For no particular reason, he climbed it. While looking up as he climbed the hill, the majesty of the mansion looked to be awaiting him.

Somehow or other, Natsuno rose up until he was before that gate,

losing sight of what he was supposed to do there. Turning back would be all too ridiculous, but on the other hand he didn't feel like taking the woodland path around back into the village either. So with a glance at the mansion, he entered into the forest of firs at a nearby spot. He would try walking down the slope and seeing where he came out at.

Avoiding the thickest part of the thickets, while meandering off course aimlessly, he went down the slope. Seeing a human outline between the spaces of the trees was a complete coincidence. Natsuno's feet came to a stop. He could see two people on the other side of the forest. One was a girl not far from Natsuno's age, the other was a boy who looked to be in sixth or seventh grade. The two were hidden between the trunks, peering outside of the forest. They were watching the forest road---or possibly past the forest road at the Kanemasa mansion.

From Natsuno's position, he couldn't see the girl's face. He all he could see was a long braid from behind, and a rounded facial outline. He didn't think he'd seen her before, but strangely he had the feeling that she was the girl. The girl who wanted to give him something at Megumi's funeral.

(There's no way.)

It was just that he was thinking about that, so he considered it. There shouldn't be such a coincidence. Even while thinking that, Natsuno no longer thought that that girl was a complete unknown he'd never seen in his life.

(What are they doing?)

It was like they were scouting out Kanemasa. Natsuno tilted his head, then saw a figure behind the girl. They were about ten meters behind the girl. Hiding his body in the thick brush, a young man was watching the two from behind.

With no particular basis, he thought that it was Tatsumi. Kanemasa had a young servant by that name. He wasn't from the village. His scent was different. That was the intuition that Natsuno as a fellow non-villager felt.

"Oi, you two over there," Natsuno called out promptly. "What're you doing?"

He himself didn't know why he called out. Pretending not to notice Tatsumi, keeping his gaze stayed straight ahead, on the girl who jumped up and turned around. While thinking he was acting exaggerated himself, he too casually waved his hand, and with exaggerated steps started towards the girl and the boy. In the faint time he had averted his gaze, the figure had faintly moved and faded into the greenery.

"You, you're Shimizu's friend, aren't you?"

Kaori gripped Akira's hand in one hand and pressed her other hand to her chest when called out to. She could feel her heart going into convulsions. Natsuno looked as if he were going to say it was a complete coincidence meeting her as he casually strolled around the thicker underbrush towards her.

"Did we meet at Shimizu's funeral? Sorry, if I've got the wrong person."

"No...." Kaori was aware that her voice was trembling. He could probably tell that they were spying on the Kirishiki house. Didn't Natsuno think that was suspicious? Akira's hand gripping at hers was painfully strong, too. Was the sweat and the shivering coming from her hand or from Akira's hand?

"Wrong person?"

"No---Uhm, that's right. We did meet."

I thought so, Natsuno said, turning his eyes towards the inside of the forest. "We met at a good time. I've got something I want to ask you."

She nodded as Natsuno gestured towards the forest road.

"Over here."

"Uhm, I..."

"Whatever, just come on. ---You, what was your name again?" While walking on ahead, Natsuno asked. Kaori turned her eyes from Akira who looked at her questioning as she answered.

"I am Tanaka. Tanaka, Kaori..."

"And the little guy with you?"

Akira tore his hand from hers as if angry.

"Tanaka Akira."

"Oh."

Going along the village road, it came out at the side of the Kanemasa house. Natsuno immediately looked down the slope. Kaori wanted to return to inside the woods but Natsuno's pace didn't seem to give her the opening to say as much.

Exchanging looks with Akira, she hurried after Natsuno to keep up with him. Natsuno didn't ask until they were mostly down the hill.

"You two, what were you doing in a place like that?" He asked without turning around, in a low, almost hushed voice.

"We weren't really..."

Once they were at the botton of the hill and on the village road below, Natsuno at last turned around. "Unless I'm wrong, the one to send Megumi's post card was you, wasn't it?"

Kaori blinked with surprise.

"You said you had something you wanted to give me someday didn't you? Was that Shimizu's late summer greeting card or wasn't it?"

For a moment she cowered, looking between Akira and Natsuno, but Natsuno didn't particularly seem to be blaming her.

"It wasn't you?"

"....It was, but."

She thought he was angry, but Natsuno only nodded. At the four way crossroads, he turned towards Monzen. Without thinking, Kaori followed Natsuno, walking alongside him.

"But, I mean, Yuuki-san didn't seem like he wanted to take it! But, Megumi wanted you to have it and worked so hard to write it. So I put it in the mailbox in Megumi's place. It's not really a bad thing to do."

"I don't mind that."

Kaori looked up at Natsuno's calm profile.

"....You were surprised?"

"Well, yeah."

"Was that what you wanted to ask me?"

Yeah, Natsuno said, looking behind himself. "Did you guys notice? Just before, the young guy from the Kirishikis' was behind you."

Kaori's breath stopped. "Before....?"

"Mm. Probably the guy called Tatsumi, I guess. It was like he was spying on you guys."

Kaori looked back at Akira. Akira's face was pale as he shook his head.

"I didn't notice...."

She felt a strange chill.

"Why were you in a place like that?"

"There's no particular reason...."

"You were spying on Kanemasa weren't you?"

Not really, Kaori murmured. "More importantly, where are we doing?"

"I'm not really going anywhere in particular. ---Tanaka, was it? You're Shimizu's friend?"

"That's right. I'm a year younger than megumi. We're childhood friends. Our houses are close to each other and all."

"Hmm. ... And, why were you watching that house? So sneakily like."

"Like I said, we weren't!"

"Is peeping your hobby? You and Shimizu have that in common."

At Natsuno's nonchalant tone, Kaori blinked, then glared at him. "It's not. And Megumi didn't peep, either!"

"That right? She was there a lot, that Shimizu. All hiding in my backyard."

Kaori swallowed a breath. Natsuno had noticed. Realizing that such a huge secret had been seen through, Kaori felt embarrassed, and was even embarrassed with herself for being embarrassed. At the same time, her anger towards Natsuno bubbled up. Akira's voice only added to that.

"Heeeh? Megumi was doing something like that!"

"You just be quiet!" Kaori glowered at Akira. She turned her glare from Akira who hung his head towards Natsuno. "Yuuki-san, you're a cruel man, aren't you!"

"Cruel? Why?"

"Because, you knew that Megumi was visiting your house, didn't you? If you did, then why did you say something so cruel at the funeral?"

"I thought it'd be obvious, it's because I knew."

"Megumi---Megumi loved you, Yuuki-san! Enough to go visiting your house like that. She wanted to talk to you but couldn't, looking at your room from far away, she was serious enough about you that just that filled her heart with happiness!"

I see, Natsuno said turning back to look down at Kaori with scorn. "You're just like Shimizu, huh?"

"Why do you have to put it so cruelly?"

"Cruel? She lurks around my house and peeps in on my room and you're telling me to be grateful for it?"

But that's, Kaori started to say before losing her words.

"If it was you would you be happy? If some boy from your class was always appearing in your neighborhood, peeping in on your bedroom. You wouldn't think that was creepy, you'd just be touched by something like that?"

"But, Megumi was...."

"I just feel creeped out by it. So I hated Shimizu. Those are my honest feelings.

Kaori bit her lip. She had thought that boys couldn't really understand a girl's delicate feelings anyway but she was too timid to say it.

"I don't think it was, but it wasn't you, was it?"

"What wasn't?"

It's nothing, Natsuno mumbled. "But you're not coming by my house, are you?"

"Get over yourself."

"I'm not particularly conceited. I'm confirming that you're not."

"I'm not. Even if you asked me to, I wouldn't go to your house!"

"Right," Natsuno's answer was blunt. As if mumbling, he said "Then... who is that?"

Kaori tilted her head. "Someone is coming?"

"Mm. And at night. Right where Shimizu was always at. It's like---Shimizu's still coming."

"It might be Megumi. ...Since Yuuki-san is so mean to her, she's having regrets."

She had said it as sarcasm, but Natsuno's response sounded oddly serious.

"It might be."

Kaori suddenly had an inexcusable feeling. Towards Natsuno---and, towards Megumi.

"It was a joke. It isn't Megumi. Megumi wouldn't bear a grudge."

"Is that right?"

"It is right. But, maybe she has something she wants to complain about to you."

"What?"

"Who knows... It might be something she wanted to say but couldn't, or maybe it's even something else."

"Something else?"

Kaori fleeting looked to Natsuno. "For example, that she didn't die of illness, or."

"It was an illness wasn't it?"

"That's right, but. .... But, that's not all it could have been. The doctor of the Ozakis' examined her. They said he said it was simple

anemia. It seems the doctor was really surprised that that suddenly happened to Megumi. He said that shouldn't have been possible, like."

Hn, his response was cool but Natsuno had a strangely serious expression. He was seriously listening to Kaori, as if scrutinizing her words. At the very least, he didn't seem to think she was talking crazy.

"Megumi.... went missing, didn't she, a little before that."

"Went missing?" Natsuno turned to face Kaori. "Ah, she didn't come home, my old man said when he went out looking for her. Something like that did happen."

"She was found collapsed in the mountains.Since then, she was sick and bedridden. She died like that. It was the 15th."

"Right."

"I went to pay her a get well visit on the 13th, on the night of the Obon welcoming fires. Back then I didn't think it would be the last time I saw her but... At that time? I met the Madame of the Kirishikis. On the way to Megumi's house."

Natsuno's feet came to a stop as he turned to face Kaori and Akira. They'd come to just before the Otabisho in Monzen where the palanquin was set during festivals. Natsuno pointed to it. "You wanna sit?"

Kaori nodded and went to the Otabisho. There was nobody around at the Otabisho. Natsuno sat at the dried hand washing well. Akira stood cheekily at Natsuno's side. Kaori took a seat at the side of the well on the rock whose purpose she never did know.

"....So?"

"That's all. It was my first time seeing one of the Kirishikis. I mean, since moving in, they haven't shown themselves at all, have they, those people. And so I told Megumi. That just before the Madame of the Kirishiki's was around. That she was pretty. And then Megumi.... said she knew."

"She knew?"

Kaori nodded, thinking it strange that she had told Natuno something like this.

"I'm sure, she said it. It was like she'd met the madame of the Kirishikis. But, the day Megumi went missing, I met with Megumi at the bottom of the hill. Megumi was interested in the Kirishiki mansion. During the summer I saw her so many times at the bottom of the hell. Megumi wanted to know what kind of people lived there. Like she'd never met any of the Kirishiki people."

Natsuno listened to her with a serious expression.

"But, isn't that strange? Megumi went missing on the 11th. After that she was sick in bed. But on the 13th when I saw her, Megumi acted like she had met the madame of the Kirishikis. So, when did she meet the Kirishiki madame?"

"On the 12th or the 13th----you'd think, normally."

"That can't be right. I don't think Megumi went outside on the 12th or the 13th. If she went out, she would have mailed the late summer greeting card, I think. There's a post box right near Megumi's house."

Natsuno tilted his head faintly. "Couldn't she have just forgot about it?"

"That might be the case but.... That was a late summer greeting card, wasn't it?"

"Aa."

"Not a mid-summer greeting card. Since she had to write it over so many times, it turned into a late summer greeting card, she wrote, right?"

"She did."

"A late summer greeting card can be sent from the first day of

fall."

"Is that right?"

"That's right," Kaori said looking at Akira. Akira looked between Kaori and Natsuno, interested. "When I looked it up, the first day of fall is August 8th. But, Megumi had a misunderstanding. She thought that a late summer greeting card was after Obon started."

I see, Natsuno mumbled.

"That was a late summer greeting card. If Shimizu thought that the cut off for a mid-summer greeting card was Bon, that was written just before Bon. On the 12th or the 11th, or if not then, the 10th. If it was around then, she'd figure it would take two days to send, huh, since it has to go through the Mizobe post office first."

"Mm. Right---that's right."

"Shimizu wrote a midsummer greeting card, and assuming the two days max shipping time, realized it would come during Bon. So, she rewrote it as a late summer greeting. If she sent it on the 10th, it'd arrive on the 12th, so there'd be no need to write it. It was the 11th. The 11th is an awkward point. If it takes two days, it'd come on the 13th but if it was fast it would arrive on the 12th."

Kaori felt herself being encouraged. The feeling that what she'd been carrying in her chest might be understood by someone else.

"It wasn't finished on the 10th. So it wasn't sent. On the 11th it was finished but with awkward timing. So Shimizu waited a day to send it. Or she planned but on the 11th, Shimizu went missing, and after that she was bedridden. If she went out, the post box was nearby, so she'd have probably mailed it. But Shimizu wasn't able to sent it."

"Woah," Akira interrupted. "Nii-chan, your brain's quick, isn't it! Totally different from Kaori."

Kaori gave Akira a small push. Natsuno ignored that and continued as if talking to himself.

"The odds are high that Shimizu didn't go out on the 12th or the 13th. But she acted like she knew someone on the 13th that she didn't know on the 11th. If the Kirishiki's madame did meet with Shimizu, it'd be the 11th. After parting with Tanaka..."

Kaori gave a firm nod. "Yes--and then, when Megumi and I parted, I saw her going up the hill."

"Up the hill..." Natsuno mumbled. "So that's why you were spying on the Kirishiki house. On that day, Shimizu went up the hill. And she met wit the Kirishikis' wife. And then she went missing, then when she was found she was sick. Even the doctor was surprised with how bad it turned and... she died."

Kaori nodded. Akira's eyes were shining as his body leaned forward. "They did something to Megumi. Don't you think so?"

"Did what?"

Well, he murmured. Kaori shook her head.

"I don't know... but, maybe Megumi wanted to tell you that, and she can't move on...."

"Or if not that, she might have risen up."

Kaori blinked. She looked to Natsuno who looked out over the scenery with a serious expression.

"----Eh?"

"She died and might have risen up. I've been thinking, the one coming around here at night might be Shimizu."

"That can't be!"

"Can't it?" Natsuno looked at Kaori. "Do you believe in vampires?"

Before Kaori could answer, Akira shot up. "I saw it! That's why I said to go to Kanemasa and pulled Kaori along!"

"Saw it?"

Akira nodded gravely. "The sawmill's Yasuyuki Nii-chan. ---He died. In August. But I saw him, just yesterday, climbing up the slope and going in the Kanemasa house."

Natsuno looked to Kaori imploringly.

"Akira said so. But, since I haven't seen anything...."

"I'm telling you, there's no mistaking it!"

"So Akira says, but I don't know. But, I think something did happen to Megumi on the 11th. And that it was at the top of the hill. Maybe even the Kanemasa's madame did something to Megumi, I think. And then she died. ---She died, and ended up buried in the ground..."

Aa, Natsuno nodded.

"And then? When I saw the Kirishikis' madame, she wasn't alone. She was at the Ohtsuka sawmill. With Yasuyuki-san."

"Is that true?"

"Mm.... So, I think it's weird. Megumi and Yasuyuki-san both met the madame of the Kirishiki's, before they died. But, I can't believe it."

"If you think the dead can come as ghosts if they have something to say, it's not that strange that they can rise from the grave is it?"

That's---exactly right. Kaori gripped at her shirt.

"But, no. I can't believe in that."

"I'm the same," Natsuno said lowly. "So, I thought I'd confirm it."

Akira looked up at Natsuno. "Confirm it? How?"

"I'll dig up Shimizu's grave."

You can't, Kaori shrieked. "You're kidding, right?"

"Why? If I do that, we'll know in one shot. Whether Shimizu rose

up or not. Even without checking on Shimizu's corpse itself, I think we'd know by looking at the coffin. If she rose up, the lid would have to be opened, and there should be some signs of it. Even without digging it up we might be able to tell by looking at it."

Akira jumped with excitement. "That's right! We'll just do that!"

"We can't, we can't do that. Something like that...."

"Then, Kaori can wimp out," Akira said, looking up at Natsuno. "I'll help. Should we do it now?"

"There are tools we need to do that. By the time we gather those and get prepared it'll be dark. It might be better to do it tomorrow."

"Is that right. Then, tomorrow. It's Sunday, too. Lucky, isn't it?"

Natsuno just nodded.

"But that's... even if you don't go that far to confirm it..."

Nastuno gave a disinterested response. "I can't just let it go. If the one coming at night is Shimizu, I think I'll be the next one attacked."

Natsuno said, gazing at Kaori. "You, you know where Shimizu's grave is, don't you?"

sinnesspiel

3

When Motoko returned from Chigusa, her mother-in-law Tomiko came to meet her at the entryway as if she couldn't wait any longer. "Ah, Motoko-san. I was just wondering if I should telephone Chigusa."

When Tomiko said those words, Motoko felt the blood drain from her face in an instant. "Did.... something happen?"

It couldn't be, not to Shigeki or Shiori. In an instant, the worst her imagination could muster flooded her mind, her knees going weak.

"Tokio-chan has died, they say."

Eh, Motoko started. It took her a few seconds to realize who "Tokio" was again, but when she finally realized it, Motoko instantly felt gratitude towards someone. Thank godness that God--if such a being existed--was not that unkind, Motoko thought, characteristically.

"Tokio-san, the firefighter?"

Maeda Tokio who lived in the Sotoba district washer husband's cousin. He was a little older than Isami and worked at the Mizobe fire station. At first Motoko thought that there was probably some kind of accident at work, or something along those lines.

"Yes, that Tokio-chan! It seems he was sick with something. Well after all, he was a fireman, so of course he was a hardy man but even he as bedridden since the day before yesterday, from the sounds of it."

"My.... Was something wrong with him?"

she asked as they went from the entryway towards the living room, prompting Tomiko to make a sullen face.

"Well about that... They say they don't know. Tokio-chan was a boy who could take a lot after all. It seems he didn't say a thing. Though it seems like his parents were worried and called for the doctor of the Ozakis."

Tomiko was saying, but the moment she had said "doctor of the Ozakis", it was with an expression of open disgust. It seemed she still hadn't forgotten the squabble from when her father-in-law Iwao had died.

"They did call for him but it looks like it didn't do much good," said sounding thorny, snorting through her nose. "It sounds as if Tokio-chan suffered in silence but apparently he had been sick for a long while. I don't know if he might have been seeing a doctor in Mizobe, because he never leaked anything even to Rika-san."

While speaking, Tomiko sat down in the living room and poured hot water from the small tea pot.

"Oh..." Rika was Tokio's wife. If she remembered, she was about Motoko's age. "Rika-san must be very depressed with how sudden it was. I'll have to pay my condolences..."

"Today she seems to be doing well, she even forced herself to go into work it looks like. Since Tokio-chan was always so serious like that."

"It's because there was a lot of responsibility with his job."

"Actually, it seems someone's taken his post. They said he apparently quit at the fire station."

"My---Why?"

"They say they don't know. It seems he just said that the fire station was hard on a body, so he must have actually been sick for some time. Since he quit, they can't just shift gears to somebody new right away. So for the time being, since there were many things they had to sort out and train a replacement, so he was forced to

keep coming in, but."

Is that so, Motoko said as she took the teapot Tomiko passed over and peered inside. Tomiko was the spitting image of a fireman, and he seemed to think of the vocation as his purpose in life. For him to quit something he thought so much of, his body must have been in a terrible state of suffering. Surely Rika must have been relieved that he had quit. She was more afraid of Tokio dying at his post than anything. And yet, he still died---.

It's scary, she thought. Why do people die? Death attacked from the shadows. Why couldn't people sense it and avoid it? Motoko didn't believe in the likes of God but sometimes she couldn't fight the feeling that they were in the palm of somebody's hand. That somebody was none too kind. If anything they were malicious. Their actions were capacious, poisonous in a way.

(Let me be...)

Even if just the people precious and near to her. Motoko wrapped up the tea put and held it tightly in both hands.

(I'm begging, please don't do anything cruel to me.)

sinnesspiel

4

"Kazuko, the working gloves?"

When asked that by her husband, Ohkawa Kzuko peered beneath the counter from behind him. "In that box."

"Ain't there." Ohkawa said, to which Kazuko remarked Oh my. She could tell her husband was in a foul mood. Her husband always was the type to get frustrated over little things but this was worse than that. It was as if everything around was constantly upsetting her husband.

"I wonder if we've run out of them? I'm sorry about that," Kazuko said with a feigned smile, lining up a detailed excuse. "I guess since there's just been so much happening, it slipped my mind. But, how strange. I was sure there were some left in there, but. Maybe Matsumura-san or Atsushi might have taken them? We really shouldn't already be out of them..."

Ohkawa's expression twisted with outrage. Knowing what that meant, Kazuko quickly turned around. "I'll go to buy them now. It really is strange. There should have been some left but. I wonder who might have taken them? Even though the one who took the last pair really should have told me!"

While saying that, Kazuko quickly left the shop. Come twilight, even the shops in the shopping district were making preparations to close for the day. There were already several shops with their shutters already down. They were the shops of those who had moved. Without a word to anyone, they went missing as if they were running away. The string of death announcements, (the Murasako Rice Shop also had successive funerals themselves....)

moves, and the mysterious rumors. If things which were meant to be like "this" were even a bit off from "this" it put Kazuko's husband in a foul mood.

Kazuko hurried the small distance ahead into the Gotouda clothing store. The incredibly small shop had only things like work gloves, completely common-place under clothes lined up that nobody but the elderly would be interested in.

"Excuse me. Could I bother you for about twenty pairs of work gloves, I wonder?"

Gotouda Kumi worked within the darkness of the shop. Kumi raised her blank face, giving a labored nod. Behind Kumi, one floor step up in the living room was a woman she had never seen before.

"Oh my, is she customer?" Kazuko peeked into the living room. The unfamiliar woman might have noticed Kazuko, she did turn her gaze towards her, but without even a smile she returned her attention to the TV. She's a kind of gloomy girl, Kazuko thought. She should have probably been about the same age as Kazuko, but.

"Cousin," Kumi answered.

"Oh my, yours, Kumi-san?"

".....Right. I'm turning the store over to her."

"Eh?" Kazuko looked to Kumi as she took out the work gloves from a shelf drawer. "What are you saying?"

"I've turned over the shop to my cousin. Since I'm leaving the village."

"That's.... my, but why?"

"My daughter's marrying. So, I'm going too."

Kazuko was flabbergasted. Kumi's daughter Kyouko was a 40 year old widow. Of course people did have second marriages but it bothered her that Kumi's expression wasn't very light, and that there was a tone of formality to her voice.

".....You're going with her?"

"Right. I'm going with my daughter."

"That's, well that's glad news, isn't it? That's nice, isn't it." Kazuko tried to force herself to sound encouraging but Kumi only nodded with a melancholy face. "And, when is that?"

"Who knows. Maybe tonight."

"Tonight?"

Right, murmured Kumi, presenting the gloves to her as if forcing them on her.

sinnesspiel

5

Hirosawa was surprised by the inexplicable build up in himself. Coming home from business he had in Mizobe, driving along the sparsely lit national highway, he realized that he was feeling melancholy.

His house was in the village. His wife and young daughter were likewise there. It was the village he was born and raised in, the village his wife was born and raised in, the place where his daughter was born and would continue to be raised. With such strong regional and blood bonds, it was where he belonged and yet he felt nervous in returning there. The obligation that he had to return was stronger than the sentiment of wanting to go home. That was a first.

Bit by bit the houses lessened, meaning there were no more street lights. Not only that, it seemed as if the darkness compounded. A mountain village cut off from civilization--from the outside world. Isolated in darkness, his hometown was surrounded by death.

The village is surrounded by death.

The phrase which once felt tranquil and pious now felt ominous. Hirosawa's own internal image of "death" had changed. It was not something which stood in quiet dignity. It was something more greedy and ravenous, and something that even slyly hid itself, sneaking up behind him. Like a starved beast it hid, surrounding the village.

Since summer, the deaths had continued and increased. Death was something that came in mysterious waves---it had already gone past something that could be spoken of with such a phrase. It was

apparently abnormal. Whispers that it was a plague spread like disease themselves. Hasegawa from Creole had whispered to him that the doctor of the Ozakis had implicitly acknowledged as much. I see, so it was, he thought while on the other hand thinking is it really a plague? If asked what it were if not a disease he would be hard pressed to answer but he couldn't help the feeling that the word "plague" wasn't suited for what was surrounding the village.

The reason he thought that was

Because the number of his students was soundly dropping. In a school small enough that each grade had only one class group, even if you tried to ignore it it was clear that the students were decreasing. There were none who died. All of them had transferred, so it shouldn't have bore any relation to the plague. They transferred to schools in the city but all of them were sudden, and without filing the proper paperwork. Suddenly, they stopped coming to school. There would be a call from someone distant relative, or they'd send the papers in. Even if he were to try asking the surrounding circumstances, they families whereabouts would already be unknown, with no means of contact. For example, Koike Touko, with no regard for her grandfather left behind in the village, in fact the grandfather himself didn't know where his family had gone; there were cases like that. Suddenly, the students were gone. They weren't dead but it was similar to the impression of death spreading through the village. ---Too similar.

In such a somber mood, Hirosawa returned to the village. He turned the steering wheel just before the village entrance. His car pulled into the brightly lit gas station.

Kusunoki Gas Station was run by only the Kusunoki parents and children. There was Kusunoki Masaya and his wife, their eldest son and his wife, and their second son. When he stopped his car, it was Masaya who approached as if dragging his feet. Hirosawa opened his window and took the key from the ignition. Kusunoki seemed sullen as it accepted it. As their hands touched, his felt quite chilled by the night.

"Good evening. ---Regular, full tank, please."

Kusunoki nodded. The second son Shouji came along dragging himself in the same manner. Kusunoki passed the key to Shouji, taking the dust cloth.

"You don't appear to be doing well."

Hirosawa said as he got out of the car; Kusunoki only replied is that right. His speech sounded heavy. He seemed terribly labored. The hand wiping his windshield looked lifeless.

"It's become quite cold in the mornings and evenings, hasn't it? Have you been all right?"

"....Yes."

The conversation was continued spottily with lethargic responses. It was somehow off, he had the feeling. The station's lights were on and he couldn't see inside but he didn't see signs of anybody. It seemed that tonight only Kusunoki and Shouji were there.

Even when the point of naturally continuing the conversation had passed, Hirosawa asked about it somehow or another, to which Kusunoki nodded.

"We're quitting, so."

Eh, Hirosawa said looking back at Kusunoki. Kusunoki gave a ceremonial nod. "We are folding up the business and moving away."

But, Hirosawa murmured. There was only one gas station in the village, and they took care of all of the villagers in some way or another. On top of that, Kusunoki Gas station handled the village's propane too. You could even say every single person in the village were customers of the station. The Kusunoki closing up shop would cause great trouble to everyone, and Kusunoki should have had considerable business. He couldn't imagine a reason they would close.

"My nephew asked me to turn it over to him, so it's come to that."

"Ah... Is that right. But, still, so suddenly?"

Kusunoki limply dropped the cloth into the bucket. He murmured with a vast and wandering gaze.

"I'm scared of Sotoba..."

Hirosawa furrowed his brows, tried to ask what Kusunoki meant by that but Kusunoki turned his back and returned inside the building.

sinnesspiel

6

Night came to the village once again. Gazing out the window at the sight of the dark village night, he let out a breath and turned his back to it. Inside the nurse's station it was well lit, organized and coordinated in a practical manner.

Yasumori Setsuko seemed to be showing good progress. When Seishin came to visit her bedside she was well asleep but the color had returned to her face and her breathing seemed considerably calmed. According to Toshio it was a clear convalescence.

(Nothing happened... last night.)

Nor throughout all of today's clear autumn day. Setsuko continued to improve.

(It's quite an implication.)

Toshio faced the coffee maker, separating out its deep, dark contents into two cups. He set them out on the office room table.

"What do you think? Think they'll come to try to get her in secret tonight?"

Who knows, Seishin murmured. Paying Seishin's bewilderment no mind, Toshio drew out a book from the nearby cupboard. He had opened the book last night too but it didn't look like he'd gotten any further in it since then.

"I wonder how far their powers go. Think they can turn into animals or walk through walls?"

"Who knows..."

"In movies, they use crosses to repel them, don't they? Crosses and garlic, and they're not reflected in mirrors, and they're weak to sunlight. ---Sound right?"

Seishin breathed a sigh as he sat before Toshio, opening the notebook with the notes he'd taken for his own manuscript. "I think it's a matter of how you define a vampire."

"A vampire's a vampire."

Seishin softly shook his head. "What we generally understand as a vampire is a fictional construct. The original prototype lies in what Slavic peoples had called

vampir

, and it's thought that vampires were modeled off of them. That said, in actuality,

vampir

and vampires are vastly different, to the point where you could even say not even the fundamentals remain the same."

"Hnn..."

"*Vampir*

are "The Risen." They're dead who should have been buried who revive from the grave and threaten the living. Those the

vampir

haunted became

vampir

themselves."

"It's that." Toshio leaned forward but Seishin smiled wryly.

"I don't know if we can say that much. There is a famous story

regarding

vampir.

"At the beginning of the 18th century, strange incidents occurred in a town called Meduegna, and a military physician dispatched from Belgrade wrote an investigative report. In this village over a period of about three months, ten or so people had died. The villagers claimed that it was a

vampir

. About five years before, a man named Arnold Paole died. While this man was alive, he said that that he had been haunted by a

vampir

. There was folklore amongst the Slavic people that those who were haunted by a

vampir

could take up and eat the dirt of the

vampir

cursing them, or take that dirt and smear it all over themselves to escape their curse. Paole did such a thing and escaped disaster that way, it was said.

"But this man named Paole died. About a month after his death, rumors that Paole was wandering about as a

vampir

spread. Actually, several villagers had died, and the people excavated Paole's body but when they did Paole's dead body showed no signs of decay, almost as if he were in fine health. His nails and whiskers grew, and he had even gained weight compared to when he was alive. His flesh had a healthy red glow, and in places old skin was coming off with new skin growing brightly back in place."

"That was exfoliation," Toshio said sounding annoyed. "That's a part of decomposition. The epithelium peels off and the dermis is exposed."

"Quite possibly," Seishin said giving a wry smile.

"It was called a red glow but wasn't that also decomposition? Once they decompose, the blood pigmentation leaks through to the tissue and stains them a night-soil red that presents as dark brown. With the gasses building up trapped in the body, it swells. With the highs and lows from that swelling pulling on the skin, that'd make it look plump and glowing. The infamous swollen look. ---And the nails and hair growing thing, the corpse gets dehydrated and the skin withers, so it just looks like it."

"Likely. But it's likely a matter of the fact that at that time, there wasn't as much knowledge about corpses like that. Looking at it in the present day it's recognized as simply a rotting corpse but at the time it looked to be quite alive. Even though it was dead, it appeared to be living, by their thinking. And moreover, Paole had fresh blood coming from his mouth and ears, and the inside of the coffin was smeared in blood. This was taken as proof that Paleo had no doubt become a

vampir

and drank blood, so just as village lore said they stabbed them in the heart with a stake. When they did, Paole let out an anguished scream, and a large quantity of blood flowed out from his corpse. The people burned Paole's corpse and buried the ashes."

Toshio sighed. "That's completely normal for a dead body. If the decomposing gasses leaked out after he was staked, the vocal chords would tremble, right? Even if they said fresh blood came out, wouldn't that just be the decaying liquids leaking out?"

"Probably so. --In

vampir

discussions, accounts of an actual victim with their blood sucked

or witness account of blood sucking on sight are rare. Even so, it was often said that large amounts of a fluid like blood were sighted, and when struck with a stake, it overflowed. Observers couldn't explain where that quantity of blood could have come from. They didn't have an understanding of the human decomposition process. So there was no mistaking that it had been sucked into the

vampir's body after death, it was thought. In other words, there was no doubt blood was sucked. And because of blood sucking, the body didn't rot, it in fact betrayed a lively form, they thought. Even in the folklore, it isn't a truth but conjecture even within the context of the legends

themselves."

Toshio's brows furrowed as if thinking. "So this is how it is, in other words? At the time, they didn't have concrete knowledge about dead bodies. A body that swelled when it decomposed didn't mesh with what their idea of a "dead body" was. And furthermore this dead body's in the ground. The decomposition of a body exposed to the air decomposes much more quickly than one under the ground without exposure. They were sure it just rotted down to the bone, but that's not the case. Far from it; they can look more hardy than when they were alive. So that's why it became a story of strange happenings to them. They needed an explanation for why something so abnormal happened. The result of that was the birth of the monster called the

vampir

, you're saying?"

"That's probably how it went I think. They needed the word

vampir

to explain the abnormality of a dead body. In order to explain the blood flowing in the coffin, they needed to add on the characteristic of 'sucking blood' to the concept of a

vampir

. In order to explain how they looked healthy from the outside, they needed a

vampir

to slip out of the grave for nourishment. What came of all those needs is the

vampir."
"Hmm."

"All of that aside, Paleo was disposed of, stabbed with a stake and burned, but in the village it was told that the victims killed by a

vampir became *vampir*

. Of course, neither Paleo nor his victims were still around. They were handled by the villagers. But folklore said that livestock eaten by a

vampir

would also become

vampir

. There was no doubt Paleo sucked blood from livestock. So those who ate that livestock would become

vampir

and once again the village would probably become infected, so it went. So with the military physician on hand, they dug up the suspicious graves and dissected the dead bodies. Inside of the corpses, there were signs their insides hadn't been decaying. All of the corpses seen in that state, thought to be

vampir

, had their heads cut off and were burned, the ashes spread into the river. The physician who had overseen the bodies dissections wrote a report on what transpired and presented it to his

superiors."

"And you're saying that report still exists? As a matter of public record?"

"Right. The Europeans were shocked by the legend of the

vampir

and the gruesome customs. Information was compiled from here and there about the

vampir

but legends of "the revived" weren't limited to the Slavs. The Egyptians, the Romans and the Celts had them too. They're all across Europe, and they actually spread through Asia too. That's normal for a folk legend. But, while it had already been forgotten as a superstition, amongst the Slavic people it was spoken of as reality, and the customs that come with it were still alive."

"Hnn...."

"In the 16th century, Europe was invaded by the Ottoman Turkish empire. The Ottoman Turks seized control of Eastern Europe through the Balkan Peninsula, placing a siege on Austria. To Europe, the nation expanding in the east was a grave menace. They were close rivals for influence in the 16th century but in the beginnings of the 18th century that started to turn. At the start of the 18th century, Serbia and Wallachia seceded from Austria. They were reincorporated into Europe, the people of the occupied territories bringing their legends of the

vampir

and the strange customs associated with them. A reunion 200 years later, you could call it."

"Ah.... I see."

"But it wasn't something that only existed amongst the Slavs. People fear death. They fear the dead. Death is often epidemic in

nature. So death is all the more greatly feared. That dread leaves its mark on the world in the forms of monsters and folklore throughout the world. For the Slavs it was the

vampir.

"Something thought to be an abnormal corpse. Something they couldn't confer an explanation unto.

Vampir

rose from the grave and attacked people and livestock, sucking their blood---all of it was out of the necessity to explain an unusual corpse. Mistakes while alive, regrets in death, those who died too soon were cast as

vampir

----and so they had to explain how

vampir

were born. Alcohol, vices, demons, all manner of reasons were used and attached to it.

"Vampir

's victims become

vampir

. That was how death was epidemic. Death was genuinely spreading one after another. In order to stop this spread, they crafted a type of exorcism ritual. Fragrances, sharp metals, black magic for expelling

vampir

, for destroying them. Certainly, those who hunted

vampir

said that the smell of garlic was effective. But couldn't it also be said that rather than being effective in driving them away, couldn't you also say that being weakened by garlic was a characteristic of the

vampir

themselves?"

Toshio breathed a sigh. "Similia similibus curantur."

Seishin nodded. "Right. Like cures like. A disease brought on by filth is cured by filth. Long ago, it was thought that foul odors were the source of disease. In truth, the

vampir

must have let off a terrible odor, I would think. So, they took to using a strong scent to counteract another strong one, saying it was a magic to repel the

vampir."

"I see..."

"So it was said that garlic is effective towards

vampir

. You're saying that this brand of death occurring in the village is a vampire. Even if we grant that it's true for argument's sake, whether garlic would be effective towards those in the village is the question. As far as garlic being effective against

vampir

, there's no experimental or observational sign of such. Thinking that a strong smell should be able to overpower a foul odor is nothing more than a reflection of their sense of common sense at that time."

"But..." Toshio murmured, turning to face Seishin whose eyes

were red from lack of sleep. "Legends often hide a grain of truth in them. There are stories all over the world of "the risen dead," you were saying right? That's right, this village has its own. Isn't that a universal phenomenon? Everyone experienced situations where the dead rise up. And where the dead bodies that rise up bring more death. So therefore that's why there are stories told about them. If that's the reasoning, then there should be methods to handle them in those stories too."

"Of course." Seishin sighed. "It is a universal phenomenon. There's no human who hasn't or won't die. Death and the dead body it leaves behind are real matters experienced the world over, happening in reality. Since

vampir

are nothing more than a representation of the fear of that universal reality, there are stories everywhere about

vampir."

"But I'm saying..."

"Just as there are no people without a God, there are no people who don't fear death. Man is always afraid of death. Fearing death they wish for some existence to preside over it. Something that leaves no corpse and is not within society itself. And when remembering the dead people, they call to mind death itself, so those touched by death are a cursed existence. Man has always prayed for something to protect them from this curse. Every possible means of protection is taken up against the dead rising up, wandering out from the grave and return amongst the living, touching them with their death cursed fingers. That's precisely why in the Jomon period, the dead were handled in a crouched burial, with stones placed over the burial jars, as if to keep the lid down."

Toshio was silent.

"And death was in fact something that could start off a currant. Sometimes deaths are successive. All the more when it's a disease. Even without understanding it systematically, the knew that there

was a connection between the fatal phenomena. That's why at first they explained it as the dead trying to draw the living in with them, so they staked the corpses, in order to end the chain of deaths."

Seishin looked to both of his hands. The fact that he himself existed there. As obvious and clear as his own hands made it, death could make that truth waver. So man could not but fear death.

"....People are born and die. Nobody can run from that. Knowing that, we can't ignore it. Even when they didn't have a medical knowledge of death, they didn't just not know passively, they explained it in various ways, filling in what wasn't known with these explanations. As a result, we have vampires,

vampir

, The Risen..."

So the legends themselves can't be considered proof of vampires. ----They shouldn't be.

"Toshio, you're saying that vampires exist. And it's possible that that is so. Vampires might be something that have continued to exist in secret since times immemorial, and in that case it wouldn't be strange for legends to remain of them. Those legends may have data gathered from real experience with them, so the means that are said in legend to repel them may be effective. But how would we know if this applies to your vampires?

"Vampir

are risen corpses. And they suck human blood. Greek vampires are Vrykolakas. These too are revived dead bodies, but they aren't limited to only drinking blood. Another one is the female vampire called the lamiae. They're more of a demon that feeds on children's blood, it isn't a risen corpse or any such.

"Blood has always been made into the source of life. The connection between life and blood, or that causal relationship, could always be felt. Unnatural deaths and weakness were tied to

heavy blood loss or blood contamination. And so onto the stage comes a blood sucking demon. This demon attacks people and sucks their blood. The victims whose blood was sucked become weak and die. An inexplicable death is explained with the demon substituted as the cause.

"On the one hand there is this "blood sucking demon", and "the risen dead" is another part of legend. People have always feared dead bodies. They fear it rising out from the grave and coming back. Because of that they cast spells and rituals over the corpse, performing spells and rituals so that they don't come back into the home. But still for various reasons they came back. While there are times when it's the dead body that returns, there are also times when it's only the spirit of the dead. Even if it's only the spirit that returns, it doesn't change much of the fact that the dead had returned to the living. The ghosts were a curse on the living. An intermediary between life and death, they were a threat to the safety of the living.

"The village's "Risen" are "the dead revived." But they don't have any substance. To put it another way, they're a cross between spirits without a body and the

vampir

who have one. It may just be a revived dead body, but they don't have the same vitality as a

vampir

. You could call them a translucent existence. And while they're at the boundary of life and death, they don't suck blood.

"What would you say the terms of your vampires are? Revived corpses like The Risen? In that case, they're demons that bring disaster even without sucking blood, and Toshio's vampires in question would have to override the established folklore. Even if they suck blood, if there's no corpse, it means they aren't vampires. Or do you mean to say the most important factor is the blood sucking? Or are you saying that it has to be both?"

Toshio was sullenly silent.

"There are legends of revived corpses rising up world wide. And yet, there are also stories world wide of blood sucking demons. If you're looking to use legends as references, first you'll have to make it clear what terms define a vampire. Additionally, if you don't ferret out any from the legends around the world that confirm to that specific definition, it's meaningless. But I still don't think that doing that in itself would mean anything. That's because vampires as they are in legends are nothing more than a form given to people's fears. The Risen are a metaphor for an epidemic. Even if they pass down prevention methods or ways to repel them, it never leaves the limited scope of warding off evil, it's nothing more than the common sense devised methods to avoid plagues that are borrwing the form of a legend."

"....But, what's happening in this village isn't a plague. Is it?"

This time it was Seishin's turn to fall sullenly silent.

"This isn't a metaphor or any kind of symbolism. There really exist a bunch bringing about human deaths by blood sucking. And those deaths are continuing. The rate of contamination is magnifying. If that's not it, then there's no way to explain the victims coming in waves just like in an epidemic. Each time a peak hits, the number of victims increases. It's clearly spreading. The victims they take become like them and become a part of the blood sucking peoples and the contamination amplifies. ---It's vampires. I can't think of anything else."

It happened just as Seishin sighed. A faint, hard sound. The muscles along both Seishin and Toshio's spines tensed in an instant, they whipped around. Just as Seishin was going to call out, once again it sounded. The very faint sound of something tapping against the glass. Toshio slowly stood up, turning towards the recovery room door. He peered through the glass window of the door, opening the door carefully so as not to make a sound.

The recovery room window was a fitted one, so while there was space enough for ventilation, it wasn't something a person could come or go through. Of course this was the second story so it wasn't

as if a person could get to the windows easily but Seishin still couldn't help but think that there may have been somebody outside of the window.

With a high pitched tink of a noise, suddenly a strangely clear voice called out. There was no mistaking it: it was the voice of Setsuko who should have been asleep.

"I'm here."

Toshio snapped quickly into the recovery room. Seishin followed after. The lamp light was still on. In that light, Setsuko could be seen with her eyes gaping wide open at the ceiling. She showed no sign of noticing that Seishin and Toshio had come flying into the room.

Toshio glanced at Setsuko and then hurried to the window. He drew open the blinds.

Seishin also came to the window side, looking out. Just as Seishin peered out, a pebble came flying at and hit the glass but there was no sight of the person who threw it. From the window the yard could be seen. With no lights on that side besides the night light at the side employees entrance, it was pitch dark. Thick growing shrubbery and cover left nothing but the spread of the color of darkness. If there were indeed somebody lurking there, you couldn't see them.

"I am here," Setsuko said once again in that strangely clear voice. Toshio opened the ventilation window.

"This is my hospital!" Toshio shouted outside the window. "I won't just let you come in on your own! Get the hell out of here!"

The darkness drank in Toshio's voice. If gave no response. Tosio's words were like lines spoken to an empty theater. Just as an unthinkingly wry smile crept onto his face, a rustling sound in the leaves sounded somewhere in the darkness below. The sound of thick shrubberies swaying---and something faintly like the sound of footsteps.

Seishin's eyes froze. He had thought he had seen a black stain of a shadow, but it may have been a trick of his eyes. He had thought too that he had heard sounds going towards the causeway in the dark garden yard untouched by the light, but this too may have been his imagination.

After some time, Toshio let out a breath. When Seishin turned about, Setsuko was asleep with her eyes closed as if nothing had happened.

Was it because of what Toshio had said or did it simply flee in fear at the sight of anyone at all?

What was certain was that there had been a visitor.

sinnesspiel

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Cultural Notes

2 - 6
Vampire vs. *Vampir* - The Japanese word for vampire, kyuuketsuki (吸血鬼), is literally written, in order: sucking, blood, and oni. Just as the modern view of a vampire has changed as the folklore has spread in English and other languages, the creatures referred to as this in Japanese are also different from the original Slavic folklore. The Japanese do also at times use the loan word vampire (バンパイア, vanpaia), though the use of that particular pronunciation has yet to come up. Seishin has opted to differentiate between vampire (kyuuketsuki) and the Slavic original by using the Slavic word vanpiiru (ヴァンピール), written in translation as *vampir* in italics to denote it as an unusual foreign word. If the use of the term vampire as a loan word (vanpaia) should arise, it will be written as vampyre without italics given that particular word is a common use loan word.

sinnesspiel

1

How many times was it now that Seishin had peered out from the blinds. At last the night broke, the spectacle outside of the window coming into view. Since then, the visitor had not returned.

As he breathed a sigh of relief and turned back towards the bed, Setsuko faintly opened her eyes. As soon as he noticed that, Toshio leaned over her bedside.

"Morning. How are you feeling?"

Setsuko nodded dizzily. For a bit, her eyes roamed as if confused by her surroundings but at last she nodded.

"Well, thank you kindly... Good morning to you."

"It seems you're better than yesterday."

"Yes," Setsuko answered, surprisingly firmly. She took notice of Seishin at her bedside, then looked to Toshio in surprise. Toshio laughed.

"He's just giving a get well visit. Should I have put you on a no visitors status?"

Oh no, Setsuko said with a faint laugh. "My... Junior Monk, I'm sorry for the trouble."

"It isn't trouble. How are you fairing?"

"I do believe I'm doing a bit better. Somehow, it feels like my head is clearer than it has been for some time."

"Seems like it," Toshio said peering closely at Setsuko's face. "....Mm, really, you do seem well."

"It's because I've slept well. Lately, when I open my eyes I don't feel like I've slept at all."

"Is that right? Do you remember when you woke up last night?"

"I did, you say?" Setsuko blinked. "No. I awoke?"

"It looked like you did. I heard you sounding like you were saying something to someone."

Oh dear me, Setsuko laughed. "I wonder if I wasn't talking in my sleep?"

"You were talking pretty clearly for that. I thought someone came into the sickroom."

Setsuko faintly furrowed her brows, looking up at the white ceiling. "Now that you mention it... Didn't I have such dream? I don't remember it well, but I have the feeling I dreamed somebody had come to visit me."

"Somebody?" Toshio asked her, intentionally light in voice. Setsuko gave a forced smile.

"Not that I remember it. It might have been Nao-chan. I mean, we are at her forty-ninth day anniversary."

"....Aa."

"Might that have been on my mind I wonder? Even though it should have been the end of the mourning period," said Setsuko with a somehow lonely seeming smile. "But I had wanted to hold a memorial service. It is such a critical time. I think that I'm fretting over that. Was it the day before yesterday, or the day before that, I wonder? Around that time, you see, I had a very vivid dream. A dream of Nao-chan coming back. It was a happy and sad one, you see."

"At that time when I was doing an examination you hadn't mentioned anything."

"Well it was only a dream. I had forgotten about it until now.

---I was so happy when I'd thought that Nao-chan had come back. But what could I say to her about Mikiyasu and Susumu? Thinking how sad she would be, I felt so badly for her," Setsuko said, her eyes focused on nothing as she blinked. "But, then I suddenly realized that Nao-chan was supposed to have died too, wasn't she? If Nao-chan had returned like that, then Mikiyasu and Susumu will come back too, I realized. Everything was a bad dream, I thought, feeling at peace in my heart, but to think that that was the dream...."

".....Oh."

"I think that Nao-chan had come to welcome me. I wondered if I didn't have much longer myself, like. Did I think that when I awoke, or did I awaken and then thing that,I wonder..."

"You can't do thinking such weak willed thing like that. You've got Tokujirou-san and your other son and all, right?"

"That's right, isn't it?"

While talking, her breath seemed to quicken and shallow as Setsuko nodded.

"It'd be best to get some more sleep. Do you have an appetite?"

"No..."

"For now I'll just bring up some rice gruel, so eat as much as you can. With the drip you might not feel very hungry, but."

Yes, Setsuko nodded. Toshio nudged Seishin and stepped out of the recovery room. With a fleeting glance to Seishin he murmured.

"....Nao-san, eh?"

"Setsuko-san says it's a dream."

"The implications are heavy. Don't you thin? ---We might have to see how Nao-san's doing."

Seishin looked to Toshio's face. "Doing?"

Toshio nodded and answered lowly. "We'll try digging up her grave."

Toshio gave a cynical smile, seeing Seishin at a loss for words.

"If there's a body, no matter how healthy it looks I won't call it a vampir. ---What time're you free?"

"Please, wait a sec..." The phone rang, interrupting Seishin. Toshio picked up the receiver, giving short answered. Seishin too could imagine the topic of an early morning phone call. As expected, when Toshio hung up the receiver, he urged Seishin to head home.

"Seems that Hashimoto-san from Shimo-Sotoba's wife's died. I'm heading out. They'll probably be contacting the temple any time now too."

sinnesspiel

2

When Seishin hurried back to the temple, he arrived just as Miwako, still in her bedclothes, was hanging up the phone. "My, are you just getting home?"

"Yes--I was at Toshio's. I'd heard that the Motohashis' Tsuruko-san had passed away?"

"That's so," Miwako said with her hand to her face. "They'd called in to Toshio-kun's place, then, yes? They said she'd passed away, Tsuruko-san did. She was on in years but..."

Miwako made an anxious expression. "Why does this keep happening, I wonder? The parishioners are worried that there isn't a terrible disease spreading. .... What do you think?"

Seishin avoided her gaze. "I cannot say anything."

"Oh... Please don't push yourself too hard either, do think of yourself too. That is a part of fulfilling your responsibilities you know."

I understand, Seishin nodded. Passing by by Miwako as they went in opposite directions down the halls, Ikebe awoke and came out, his face clouding as he heard the death report. He looked to Seishin as if to say something but nothing came from his mouth. Mitsuo came and then Tsurumi came. Various parishioners gathered to participate in the services but lately the number of familiar faces felt to be in decline. In contrast, the number of unusual faces increased, so it didn't feel as if there were fewer people but it was clear that a change was occurring.

As the services finished, coming timed as if to just miss the service was Shimo-Sotoba's manager Matsuo Seiji.

In many cases the Mourning Crew's manager was an elderly person with much experience but Seiji had just reached middle age. He'd just inherited the position from his father whose body was failing him the year before last.

Seiji arrived with a cool face relaying news of Tsuruko's death. Tsuruko was an old woman who lived alone, and when a neighbor who hadn't seen her in some time became worried and stopped by the house, they had found her dead body.

"It seems she died the day before yesterday. What a bleak prospect."

Is that so, Seishin fed him the requisite responses appropriately.

"She had three children all daughters. Her oldest daughter has a household in Kami-Sotoba, she will stand in as the chief mourner. That's taken care of, but..." Saying that, Seiji's words were hesitant, looking as if sneaking a peek at Seishin's face. "If possible, we'd like to have the vigil tonight, and have the funeral tomorrow, you see. How does that sound?"

I don't mind but, Seishin started to say looking to the blackboard.

"But, tomorrow is..."

"Yes, tomorrow is Tomobiki."

"We are fine with that. But you see---Junior Monk, do you know of the latest rumors of a spreading illness?"

"Yes... well, that is..."

"Of course I understand that it isn't an epidemic. Or rather, the doctor of the Ozaki's hasn't said anything and neither has the government office, so we can only assume it isn't one. But, to be honest, things are strange this year. I can't get my mind around this many deaths in a row."

"......Yes."

"It's at least like an epidemic. Are there circumstances that mean you can't say that it is or it isn't? The government office and the hospital might have reasons they can't too. When it comes to things like that, it's something the likes of me couldn't understand but." Seiji said with a conspicuously heavy sigh. "....Don't think that I'm unfeeling. I don't want to put off the funeral to avoid Tomobiki. While we're drawing it out like that, another death notice might come in, though."

Seishin stared back at Seiji, who gave a shameful laugh.

"To be honest, doing two funerals in one day is tough. There's no guarantee it'll be only two either. Even without that, ever since summer the people on the Mourning Crew have been running all about, we're tired, you know. You could say we're succumbing to it. We have to contact the contractors to take care of the grave but even the contractors have their schedules packed full if it gets busy. And so we don't wish to postpone. All of this isn't my opinion alone, either..."

Seishin nodded. So the situation has progressed this far, he realized. Indeed, thinking of the number of funerals since summer, the tasks taken up by the managers and the Mourning Crew were beyond the pale of an ordinary suffering load. It made sense that they would be succumbing to it.

"...Understood. Indeed, it may be as you say. If you say that the bereaved family is also in agreement, I do not have any complaints on the matter either."

As if a great weight was listed from his shoulders, Seiji's expression lightened.

"I can be at ease if the Junior Monk says as much. After all, I know some of the elderly will be saying it's just terrible," Seiji said with a strained smile. "Once you get old, you can just talk without being obligated to do any action, you know? I don't know how to put this, but it's easy to talk about those doing the real, bodily work. There are some people whose work just never ends."

That may be so, Seishin nodded. Seiji bowed his head low.

"So with that said, I'll leave it to you. The chief mourner says to make the posthumous name fitting and the services minimal."

"Most certainly."

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3

"You two, where do you think you're going?"

Kaori started as her mother asked her that. She quickly hid her purse behind herself.

"Just out." The one to answer was Akira.

Their mother Sachiko looked suspiciously between the two.

"You'd better come right back. Mom has to go out for the Mourning Crew. You'll need to house-sit."

"Mourning Crew?"

Sachiko gave a more than mildly fed up sigh. "They say another one's died. The Motohashi's Obaa-chan. ---Really, I'm not liking being called out for these kinds of tasks all the time."

Akira exchanged looks with Kaori. Kaori seemed strangely tense at what there was no need to say between she and Akira. He meant to say that Motohashi Tsuruko's death was also because of "that."

"....Have a safe trip."

"Be around the house as much as you can. I'm counting on you."

With a vague nod, Kaori and Akira left the house. If the work was for the Mourning Crew she would return late, and even their mother didn't know if she would be back by dinner time.

Akira rushed towards the hokora at the base of the mountain at a hurried pace. It was at the base of the mountain that pinned down a southern corner of the village, Sumi Mountain. While Akira seemed strangely triumphant, as he approached the hokora at the mountain

base his expression darkened. At last looking outright unease, he looked to Kaori.

"Hey, Kaori. That person, do you think he'll come?"

"Yuuki-san? He'll come, won't he? This was his idea."

That's true, Akira murmured. "....He won't run out on us, will he."

"Akira, are you scared?"

Asked that by Kaori, Akira's lips tapered to a point. "Like hell I would be. But you know, adults get ahead of themselves all the time. They promise they'll go, they'll do something, then they go back on it."

"Yuuki-san is still only a first year high school student."

"People that age are the worst about it. They just go with the flow and say whatever sounds good."

"That may be true," Kaori answered. "He was serious then, but when he went home he might have started feeling stupid and changed his thinking."

If he did so much the better, she thought. Last night Kaori didn't sleep. Time lapsed and lapsed but the more time that did, the more she thought that what they were doing was stupid. They weren't kids like Akira, and this was about The Risen and Vampires. Just taking anything like that seriously in itself made her feel incredibly childish and foolish, and yet more doing something like that to Megumi's grave was too serious an affair.

"It'll be disappointing if he does. I thought he seemed promising. ---But, he won't come, will he? Since that's how it goes."

Following behind Akira who murmured to himself, Kaori walked on quietly. She had a hand held scoop and a min-rake in her hand bag but they let out a scraping noise within.

The hokora was just at the side of the canal where the end Mountain in the south crossed with the western mountains. It was

called a hokora but it really was only a tiny three walled structure with a roof. There had used to be a stone pillar there but that had been broken that summer. Crossing over the harvested fields the hokora came into view but there was no sight of anybody nearby. Coming closer still, the stone fragments were visible. It was a half standing lopsided sight. What was left over was tended to but it was still crooked.

"It figures..." Akira said with a lonely sigh. "Kaori, what should we do?"

"What should we do? If Yuuki-san isn't here, there's nothing to do."

"That's not true at all. We've got to do something even if it's just us."

Just as she was about to voice a 'but' as they came near the hokora, from behind it Natsuno's tall and thin body appeared. Akira let out a small cry.

Natsuno gave them a look to hurry them, gesturing behind the hokora. Akira hurried in that direction.

"Heeh. You really came."

Akira said that as he came around into the shadow of the hokora, earning a look from Natsuno as if asking what he was talking about.

"Nii-chan, you're a promising guy, huh!"

"Take these."

Natsuno held out one of two shovels to Akira. He had one more tool, a hoe prepared.

"We're bringing them with us? We can't hide these things at all."

"Just act confident. If we look like we're going to help dig a hole, nobody'll notice."

"There is that, I guess."

Akira said that as he looked gratefully at the shovel. Kaori found herself hiding the hand tools she had brought behind herself. Indeed, if they were serious about digging up a grave, a small scoop like that wouldn't be any use. They were more like childrens' toys. They weren't the least bit pragmatic. She was terribly embarrassed with herself for thinking so much of bringing them with her.

"But where did you get these?"

"Borrowed them from a neighbor."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. If you give a weird reason you end up more suspicious in cases like this. You just have to ask them to loan it to you without saying anything. If you do that then they'll do you the favor of assuming the reason for you."

"Nii-chan, that's bold..."

"Let's go." Natsuno spoke to Akira then looked at Kaori. "Which way?"

Kaori denoted a small path through the woods near the hokora.

"We go up that a little ways and it comes out there."

Natsuno nodded, taking the hoe and the shovel nonchalantly in hand as he lead the way. Without any signs of being worked up in the slightest he climbed up the path. Akira seemed entirely too happy as he followed suit.

There were no signs of anybody on the forest path. The birds sang, the wind blew, all on a peaceful fall day. When she thought of what they were doing, it was an all too unfitting feeling. Halfway along the forest path it became obscured. At some point underbrush had grown over it but with no branches in the way, the way was clear to see.

It was the road they had toted Megumi's coffin along. The adults solemnly carried the coffin and buried Megumi in the black hole. Megumi was buried---and there she should have returned to the

earth.

Kaori's body trembled with fear. It may have been due to a chill caught beneath the grove of the trees or it might have been because of what came to mind when she thought on the meaning of returning to the earth. That meant to decay. Megumi's body was decaying, lingering, those parts left being torn apart by bugs underground, returning to the earth.

(What if Megumi is in her coffin like she's supposed to be?)

She had a feeling that would be something more terrifying than if she weren't. She didn't want to see a rotting Megumi. She didn't want to believe that people became such repulsive, filthy things once they died. That was so many times scarier than "The Risen."

While thinking that, the opening of the pathway approached. There was an opening the size of a parking space and there two sotoba stood. One was old, another was new. The older one was Megumi's grandmother, the new was Megumi's own. The dirt which should have been a thickly packed mound had become a gentle slope.

"Mm," Natsuno said to nobody in particular, rolling up his sleeves. Donning his work gloves, without a hint of hesitation he started towards the new sotoba.

"We're really gonna do it?"

The one to ask was Akira. Natsuno took the sotoba in hand and turned to look to Akira. "You're going back?"

"It's not like I'm exactly afraid, but still. It's one thing to dig up the grave but, I mean, knocking down a sotoba's kind of, you know..."

"This thing is just a wooden plank. There isn't really anything sacred about it," Natsuno declared, striking the sotoba. Too quickly, the sotoba fell and tumbled on the ground.

"Uwa....! Nii-chan, you're overdoing it." Akira sounded like he was half shocked and half impressed but Natsuno's expression was

stern. He leaned over the fallen sotoba.

"I didn't put that much strength into it."

"Like I said!"

"The soil was already loosened. It was barely holding it up."

That couldn't, Kaori had started to say. When Megumi was buried she saw how the Sotoba was stood in place. The mound was beat down solidly countless times, the sotoba stood deeply within it, standing quite firmly, she remembered the adults checking to confirm as much.

"Look," Natsuno said pointing to the sotoba's base. "Here and here, that's two different dirt marks."

Kaori fearfilly inched closer. The pure white sotoba was dirtied by the wind and the rains. The color of the ink was washing away, the thing already displaying signs of quite a bit of wear and tear. Megumi herself would, just like this, in time be soiled, transofrming into something unsightly. That was the feeling she had. The base of the sotoba soaked in the color of the earth and took on its color. And---indeed, in two places, there was a difference in those colors.

"...There really are." Akira murmured. The difference was scarcely three centimeters in level. The earthy color was thick at the base and above that fairly pale.

"Somebody put it back up."

At Natsuno's voice, Akira looked up.

"....Who?"

"Like I know?"

"Someone besides us messed with Megumi's grave, didn't they!"

Looks like it, Natsuno murmured, moving the sotoba aside. He handled that rather solemnly. And then he took the shovel in hand to dig up the dirt. ---He really planned to dig it up.

Kaori had just been about to say let's stop when suddenly she shut her mouth. Just a ways away, amid the dry leaves she caught sight of something white. It looked to be a four cornered package. A small, box. A dirty, untied ribbon. Kaori drifted away to pick that up.

"What's up?"

"This..." Kaori motioned to it. Without a doubt. The white doily, a light blue ribbon. It was Megumi's present.

"What's that?"

Kaori looked up at Akira and Natsuno who peered at what was in her hand.

"This... is the present I prepared for Megumi's birthday. But, I, I put this in Megumi's grave..."

Natsuno's brows furrowed.

"I had them wait to bury her and placed it on top of the coffin when it was buried. I'm sure it was in the hole."

Natsuno looked back at the toppled sotoba.

"It can't be." Kaori felt her legs tremble. Could it really not be?

But Kaori had definitely put this in Megumi's grave. She didn't remember to put it in the coffin, remembering it only when they'd arrived here, having to hurry back to the house. She remembered the Junior Monk from the temple saying to her that they would wait for her. And it was put into the burial hole. It was on top of the coffin. It was covered in dirt, and the mound was formed---.

Unless somebody had dug the dirt up, this shouldn't be able to be out here. The grave was disturbed. Somebody dug up Megumi's grave, then reburied it, standing the sotoba up again.

Natsuno thrust the shovel into the ground with determination. Akira followed suit though less determined. While trembling, Kaori watched over their work, and then took on the hoe herself.

They met a thunk of resistance, against the hoe after about half an hour of digging. Without thinking Kaori threw down the hoe. Natsuno dug up the dirt around it. Soon he cast aside the shovel and began digging with his hands, and soon even that stopped.

Kaori let out an unvoiced scream. Akira came to cling to her. Natsuno had been about to say something when he looked at them.

From within the dirt a filthy coffin lid became visible. ---That lid was unfastened.

What Kaori felt before, that strange sensation of resistance when the tip of the hoe hit the lid, was that what had displaced it or was it already off before that? In either case, at the bottom of the hole, before Kaori and the other's eyes, a triangular gap about five centimeters wide between the lid and the coffin was visible.

Kaori shook hard enough to feel it in her teeth, gazing into that dark crevice.

"The lid... was knocked off, right?" Spoken to by Natsuno, Kaori nodded. Of course the lid had been knocked off. Kaori was near enough to be sure of it.

"It's open..."

Natsuno put his hand to the gap.

"Ni, Nii-chan!"

"Stop it!"

Paying no mind to Kaori's scream, he put his hand to the lid and lifted, but still unable to see it, he put the shovel end between it. He forcefully wrenched the lid open and off of the coffin. Dirt avalanched down into the coffin---and inside there, Megumi was not.

As the lid was wrenched off and the coffin opened, clods of earth tumbled within.Beneath those black flecks, putting off a rotting smell were the flowers Kaori and others had put in with her. But there was no sign of Megumi herself. Not anywhere.

"---Megumi!" Kaori screamed, crouching down with her face between her knees.

There was no mistaking it. Megumi had risen.

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4

Reburying Megumi's grave, it was dark by the time they remade the mound and repositioned the sotoba. A dim light was starting to linger within the forest. Driving away the dried brush with the hoe and the shovel, somehow or another they made their way down the mountain to the village at sunset, a rust color dying the village.

"Hey... What're we supposed to do now?"

"No idea," said Natsuno, his response blunt. In spite of that, he glowered at his surroundings with a rigid expression.

Akira sat down sullenly at the slope beside the hokora where they had met. Kaori, her strength spent, followed suit. Natsuno at last must have noticed that he still had his firty gloves on, taking them off and throwing them behind the hokora.

"Megumi... I wonder where she went?" Kaori said to herself. --- That's the problem, Akira thought, too.

"Kanemasa wasn't it, since Yasuyuki Nii-chan went into Kanemasa too, I'm sure that's their nest. We'll have to take everyone out there and finish them off after all."

He looked to Natsuno expecting agreement but Natsuno gave a curt "Can't."

"Why?"

"First, we don't know what they are do we?"

"Aren't they zombies? Since they're risen dead bodies. ---No, they

might be vampires, huh? Megumi died of anemia, didn't she?"

"To start with, it's not clear what we need to do yet. If they are vampires, they can't walk around in the daylight. If you hit them with a stake they'll die. But that stuff's in movies and books and stories. We don't really know if that'll repel them or not, do we?"

"That right? ---And if they're zombies?"

"Then they could walk around in the daytime, and there's no choice but to cut off the head, at least in movies. But we don't know if that's really true or not either."

"Bet they can only walk around at night, huh? I mean, the Kanemasa bunch, I've never heard of anyone seeing them in the daytime. And Megumi died from anemia right? So it's vampires after all."

Kaori interposed. "But if they're vampires, aren't they in their coffins during the day time....?"

Natsuno nodded. "That's how it goes. But Shimizu wasn't there. She got out of the grave and went somewhere. Probably into hiding I bet. She might actually be at Kanemasa, and if that's the case, that's their haunt."

"So let's sneak in. In the daytime. While they're asleep, like."

"What about the younger guy called Tatsumi or something?"

"Huh? Come to think of it, he's the only one around in the day time."

"When you guys were spying on Kanemasa, he was behind you guys. If we figure Tatsumi's one of their bunch, then they've noticed that you guys are suspicious. In that case, their guard'll be up too, and they'll have Tatsumi moving for them in the daytime. If you snuck in carelessly, they'd turn the tables on you."

"Then, how about this?" Akira leaned forward. "In the evening or something like, and at daybreak we'll keep watch on Kanemasa. Then we'll get them when they're coming and going and deal with

them. We'll use, you know---we'll get a bunch of crosses."

"I wonder if those kinds of things really have any effect?"

There's that, Akira murmured.

It was all sounding kind of complicated. If it was like in the movies they should have been able to repel them with crosses. But there wasn't any proof that Megumi and the others were the same as the vampires in the movies. Thrusting crosses at them--what if that didn't have any effect?

"If the bunch of them are gathered in Kanemasa, the odds of running into them in the evening or at daybreak are high. But that also means the danger level is high. While defeating one of them, if two or three of them come back it'll be hopeless."

"That right... to start with, we don't know how many of them there are, huh? Since this summer how many people've died from here?"

"Hmmm..."

Akira tilted his head to the side as Kaoru spoke in a small murmur.

"I wonder if the Motohashis' Obaa-chan will rise up too?"

"Motohashi?"

Kaori nodded. "It seems she died today. She's an old woman from the neighborhood."

Natsuno fell into thought. Right---as they spoke the number of dead were increasing. What if all of them rose up? There was the possibility of doing as Akira said and lying in wait around the Kirishikis' house and lessening their numbers one by one but if their enemies increased their numbers more swiftly than that it'd be meaningless. They had to stop them at the point of entry.

Natsuno turned to look back at Kaori.

"Do you know where that Baa-san's grave is?"

"I don't know---but, you can't!"

"I get it," Akira cried out with excitement. "We wait for her to rise up from the grave, then get her, right?"

"We'll take care of it before she rises up."

"But... that's."

"We don't have any other way do we? Like your little brother says."

"It's Akira, Akira."

Natsuno gave Akira a fleeting glance and a wry smile. "Like Akira says, it's not like we can just sneak into Kanemasa. So, when it comes to what we can do I'm at a total loss. While we're like this, they're adding to their numbers. So isn't this the only thing we can do?"

"That's true but... but, I don't know where the Motohashis' Obaa-chan's grave is."

"Tonight's the vigil.?" Akira said. "Then, the funeral's tomorrow isn't it? If we just follow the funeral procession it'll be easy."

"That'll work."

"Mom's out with the Mourning Crew, so we'll basically know what time the funeral starts. If we go nearby at that time we can follow after them."

"Mm," Natsuno said giving Akira a light poke. "Crafty, aren't you?"

"Heh heh."

Akira seemed happy as he laughed. Kaori somehow didn't feel into it.

"I'll call you tomorrow when Mom leaves. Nii-chan, what's the phone number at your place?"

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5

"Oh my, it's the Junior Monk!"

Seishin came into the back entrance of the hospital just as Kunehiro Ritsuko had finished her preparations to head home. It was already close to 9:00. With an awkward sensation thinking "there were still staff members here?" he realized once again that the toils of the situation were not limited to Toshio.

"Will you be together with the doctor tonight?"

Seishin gave a vague, prevaricating response.

"Setsuko-san's condition is becoming better isn't it? Considerably."

"It seems so, doesn't it?"

Ritsuko tilted her head. "It must be hard on you too, Junior Monk. I'm sure the temple is busy too, and helping out every night here..."

"No... It's not like..."

At Ritsuko's words Seishin somehow felt she was trying to feel out the situation. Right, Ritsuko shouldn't

not

find the matter suspicious. No matter how he thought about it a monk wouldn't be helpful in overseeing an in-patient's status. If things were to the point of having an amateur along, it would only seem obvious to call in a nurse.

"It's the doctor too, if he's going to have the Junior Monk help, he should let us help too."

"That isn't it." Seishin quickly said. "That is... I'm getting his advice on a manuscript I'm writing now."

"Oh?"

"I wanted to hear his opinion as a doctor. So that is why I'm staying with Toshio."

"What, so that's the case?"

"The truth is I'm keeping him company as he makes his rounds in apology for that. It feels more like I'm in the way then helping, though."

"Is that is. ... But, that doesn't change that it must be hard on you. Junior Monk, please don't push yourself too hard either, yes?"

"Thank you very much."

Lightly bowing his head, feeling a cold sweat break out he ascended the back entrance stairs. ---Yes, indeed the nurses shouldn't fail to find it suspicious. Someone amongst them was bound to ask him what he was doing there. Entering the nurse station with a complicated feeling, he could hear Setsuko laughing.

"Oh no, Doctor, something so childish!"

"Ah, what's the harm? It's a charm to keep you from getting discouraged. You're thinking Mikiyasu and the others are here and you're being pulled along right? It's to keep you from turning your back and thinking like they've come to escort you too."

"Fine, fine. --Oh my, Junior Monk." Setsuko noticed Seishin peekin in from the recovery room and laughed. "Take a look at this would you? The doctor, he brought in something like this!"

Setsuko gestured to the bedside table. There there was a small honzon and a candlestick, and incense burner, a flower vase and juzu beads were gathered.

"Toshio... Where did you get these from?"

Toshio gave a shameless expression as he laughed. "I raided the family altar."

"You can't do something like that."

"It's just one night, it'll be fine. Either way Mother won't even look to notice, so the Buddha'd probably rather watch over Setsuko-san than stay at the side of an infidel like Mother." That said Toshio slipped the juzu beads into Setsuko's hand. "You got it? You've still got Tokujiro-san. Tokujiro-san lost his last wife. Having lost Mikiyasu and his cute heir of a grandson, he's a man with scant family ties left. Even though he's finally gotten himself such a good tempered second wife, even she's gotten sick. If something happens to you too, Tokujiro-san'll be the last member of his family remaining. Think long and hard about that."

"....Yes."

"If Nao-san or Mikiyasu come to your bedside in a dream, just tell them you can't leave Tokujiro-san behind and that they'll just have to wait another thirty year. Even if you don't hurry on to them, they've got their whole three person family. They can just take it easy and wait on you.

That's true isn't it, Setsuko said wiping at the corner of her eye. Toshio nodded and said he'd be nearby as he turned out the light, leaving the recovery room. Seishin followed after him.

"Setsuko-san... she's doing well, huh?"

Toshio nodded to the small voice asking him.

"She's alert and oriented, and her symptoms are clearing up. To start with she didn't enter the final stages, so she might be back to her old self with a full recovery. But," Toshio said with his voice low. "even if the symptoms are cured, we haven't cut off the source of them. Once she'd cured we can't keep her hospitalized so when she goes back home is the problem."

Seishin cast his eyes down. The first day she was hospitalized, nothing abnormal at all had happened with Setsuko. The night of

the second day, there was a visitor. They couldn't discern who they were, that figure who slipped into the darkness of the night. That may have been because of what Toshio had said or it may not have been.

Toshio turned to look back at the recovery room.

"It'll be nice if those work, but. --What do you think?"

By 'those' he must have meant the juzu and the honzon.

"Who knows..."

"The night Susumu-kun died it seems he'd said 'Mama.' Mikiyasu heard it. Why was Susumu-kun calling Nao-san? Was it just a kid calling out because he missed his mother? Or did he really see his mom? Why did Setsuko see dreams of Nao-san coming back. But not Mikiyasu or Susumu-kun."

"With that said, isn't tying those together to say Nao-san revived jumping a little too far to a conclusion?"

Toshio gave a sarcastic laugh. "Susumu-kun was still young. He couldn't really understand what it meant that his mom was dead. So he might have been in pain and just calling out for his mom. The misfortunes at Setsuko's place started with Nao-san. Setsuko-san might be subconsciously thinking that if the start of it were fixed, the misfortunes that followed would be fixed too. That might be it, that might not be it. We're betting on one or the other without any proof.."

"But."
"I know that we need proof. That's what I want too. If we look for proof of whether there are vampires or not, it'll be a relief even if it comes back negative. ---So let's dig up Nao-san's grave."
"Toshio." Seishin breathed a sigh. "That's too far. How would you expect to get Tokujiro-san or Setsuko-san's consent? Even if you explained the circumstances, they wouldn't see it the same way would they?"
Toshio widened his eyes.
"Of course not. Even if there was suspicion that she was murdered

and there was an order from the courts, even if there was a suspected epidemic and there were orders from the Health Department, they wouldn't allow something like that, now would they?"
Seishin blinked.
"That's why," Toshio said with his voice low "we'll do it in secret. Is there any other way?"
Seishin's mouth dropped open. "That's reckless."
"We have something to confirm. If we try digging up the grave, we'll know if it's Nao-san or not."
"Once we dig up the grave, all we'll know is whether she's there or not, I should say," Seishin said glaring at Toshio. "Even if for argument Nao-san isn't within, that won't be direct proof that she's risen. Even if the corpse is sleeping within, you probably won't abandon your vampire hypothesis. You'll just say that it wasn't Nao-san, won't you?"
"That's..."
"All you're going to achieve is ignoring the dignity of the dead and trampling all over the feelings of the bereaved family. I absolutely can't agree."
Toshio smacked the desk in irritation. "Then are you telling me to just fold my hands and do nothing? What else do you want me to do?!"
Seishin had no words to return to him.
"Since this summer just how many people do you think have died? And that's still increasing. It's intensifying as it goes on. I don't know the cause and I don't know how to counter it. I don't know where Ishida-san's at. The write-ups he had have disappeared with him. That's data we've got on hand. I might be able to compile it together and carry it over to Kanemasa. But if it's Kanemasa--do you think they can do something with administrator? Can they find the cause and stop the deaths? When'll that be?
"This many people're dying right before my eyes. And if we---if I do an investigation into the cause, even if it's just a hypothesis, there might be clues. It's an outrageous hypothesis but at least the symptoms match up. Ant yet you want me to sit quiet and watch over the situation without doing anything? Are you telling me to say 'I'm counting on you' and pass this weight on over to somebody else, waiting until somebody hands us reassurance on a silver platter?!"

"Toshio," Seishin spoke over him. He looked towards the recovery room. Toshio hurriedly lowered his voice.
"...I pass a heavy burden on to Kanemasa. Probably Kanemasa passes that burden on to someone else, and then that person'll probably pass it on to someone else too. If the responsibility passes on from in front of me does that mean my role's finished? I did my part, I did what I was supposed to do, so then I get to pull up my pillow and sleep easy? Even while it's still taking place right before my eyes?"
"....My mistake."
"I've got to do something. If I can't find any direction to go with it, then no matter how small a clue it is I want it. No matter how preposterous and wild a guess it is, there's a point in confirming it. That's how impending this situation is. Right now the waves are high. It's just past the peak, and probably at the middle of the month the next wave'll come. This next peak probably won't be a low one. Two becomes four, four becomes eight, eight becomes sixteen, sixteen becomes thirty two. The next one'll be sixty four, then after that a hundred and twenty eight. Two hundred and fifty-six, five hundred and twelve. ---in sum, one thousand and twenty two. How many people do you think there are in Sotoba? I'll tell you, it's one thousand and three hundred. After five twelve it's finished."
Seishin was shocked. At first it was Gotouda Shuuji and then the three in Yamairi for a total of four. In the middle of August was another peak, and when Seishin and the others had noticed the abnormality, the death toll had already gone up to ten. While investigating it the deaths continued to add on, and in a breath it had passed twenty. It wasn't that the victims were multiplying in perfect twos but each time the peak number of victims was indeed showing geometric progression.
"Where I am right now I don't have a single case I've helped. Not a single damned one. The fatality rate's 100 percent. Once it breaks out there's no saving them. On top of that, there's the strange move outs. At the rate the disease is spreading, this time next year this village is just going to be a bunch of ruined buildings."
"....I'm sorry."
At Seishin's words, Toshio kept silent as if embarrassed at his rage. Seishin couldn't help falling silent with his own shame at something unclear himself. Nor was there sound from the recovery room

either.
Seishin hung his head in shame. The dead since this summer. Such a large number of villagers were dead. A summer beyond normality, and even though it was turning to fall, it was showing no signs of being extinguished. They thought it was a disease. But even though it was spreading in a way that could only be thought of as an epidemic, they didn't think it was a specified epidemic disease either. Suspicious moves. Quitting their jobs. The village was indeed being surrounded by something (by death). Slowly but surely, it might have been becoming more impossible to think that these were normal circumstances.
"....I think that the situation Toshio's outlining is consistent with something being in the village and attacking people and sucking blood. Even though I don't understand the specific details."
"Aa..."
"Blood is being drained by some means. Because of that the victims go from anemia to shock from blood loss and die. Those deaths are continuing. It's obvious they're serialized. If we say that something is here, then as long as it remains of course they will continue. But it won't just continue, it looks like it's spreading like a contagious epidemic."
"It is contagious. The geometric progression of the number of patients is proof of that."
Seishin nodded. "Setsuko-san says she saw a dream of Nao-san. What attacked Setsuko-san may have been Nao-san who had already become the victim of something herself. If that's so, those who are attacked by something and die must revive as that same something, it would mean. And they become a point of contamination themselves. The revived dead do. The body has already been confirmed once as dead, but it rises up, it moves, it takes action. It selects its victims, conducts the attack, and threatens the well being of the living. ---A corpse demon, Shiki."
"....Shiki."
"Shiki attack people, taking in their blood. As they're an exceedingly intellectual and productive existence, I think it would be all right to view them as moving in accordance with a plan. At the very least, they aren't like a corpse that's lost its ability to think and reason--it isn't like a zombie. If we say that whoever came to visit Setsuko-san last night was a Shiki, it cannot drift in the air or walk through walls to get to its victim. It isn't a spiritual existence, it's a being

with physical limitations to its body. It's differenct from the demons or "Oni" of the village, but it's also different from a *vampir*. The *vampir* was found fresh and lively in the coffin but when the curse afflicted it, I think it would be better to understand it as a spiritual existence. But a Shiki isn't like that. Through and through, they are tethered to their body. They use their own body to move, to attack their victims. As each victim dies, they become a Shiki."
Toshio nodded. "That's all that I can think of."
"The first string of deaths began in Yamairi. The first one found in bad condition was Ohkawa Gigorou-san."
"Gigorou Jii-san was probably the first victim. Gigorou-san left the village at the end of July, stayed out overnight and came back acting strange. If it were an epidemic it'd need an incubation period but a if it was a vampire--a Shiki that attacked, there wouldn't need to be one. It's possible Gigorou-san was attacked after he went outt. And brought back calamity to Yamairi with him. Gigorou-san died at the start of August. And then he was reborn, attacking Hidemasa-san and Mieko Baa-san, then attacking Shuuji-san."
"That's not it," Seishin interrupted. "Gigorou-san's remains were found. Hidemasa-san's, and Mieko-san's too. And by mistake the three of them were cremated. Even if Gigorou-san's death was due to a raid by a Shiki, Gigorou-san can't rise. The same for Hidemasa-san and Mieko-san."
Toshio winced as if a hole had been poked through him, soon raising a finger. "What if we say that the attacked aren't sure to definitely rise up? There're those who rise and those who don't. Mieko-san didn't rise up. Maybe the same for Hidemasa-san. But, for Gigorou-san, we can't say for sure."
"There was a corpse wasn't there?"
"But one torn to pieces. Gigorou-san died in Yamairi, and what if he did rise up? Then he'd attack Hidemasa-san, he'd attack Mieko-san, he'd attack Shuuji-san. Mieko-san saw that Hidemasa-san had died, then with a sense of panic she overtook Gigorou-san who was a shadow of his former self. Gigorou-san returned to a dead body that's not risen up. But at that point Mueko-san's condition had gotten to the point of no return---
We thought it was weird. Didn't we say that Mieko Baa-san didn't report Gigorou-san or Hidemasa-san's deaths? She couldn't could she? Gigorou-san was dead, so if rose up and attacked your husband, could you report it? Even if you said it you wouldn't

expect anyone to believe it. So Mieko Baa-san couldn't contact anyone."
Seishin shook his head, deep in thought.
"....It's no good. As expected, this's wrong. I can't assent to this."
"Seishin, oi..."
"I'm not saying it as if I'm denying it from the start. It's that it doesn't add up. Listen? Gigorou-san went out somewhere in the end of July. When he came back he was acting strange. It's probably certain something happened outside the village. But soon after Gigorou-san was bedridden, Hidemasa-san was bedridden too. Mieko-san came by the hospital and said that didn't she? At that point, Gigorou-san wasn't dead. So he shouldn't have been risen up either. None the less, Hidemasa-san had fallen ill. ---So, who was it that attacked Hidemasa-san?"
"What if Gigorou-san had already risen up and come back?"
"You're saying he died and came back in only one day? If that happened, there should have been people who rose up during the overnight vigils. Isn't that right?"
Toshio, sullenly at a loss for a reply, gave Seishin a glare.
"If you've got any other explanation I'd love to hear it."
"That's what we're doing, isn't it? ---In Yamairi three people's corpses were found. Gigorou-san and Hidemasa-san were disfigured enough to be difficult to distinguish but the police did an autopsy. It was confirmed that they were indeed themselves. It'd be hard to think that Gigorou-san rose, hid himself and used another person's corpse in his place while he fled. That aside, Hidemasa-san's condition began to worsen before Gigorou-san had died. Gigorou-san may have been the one who attacked Mieko-san but it was at least impossible for it to have been Gigorou-san who attacked Hidemasa-san."
"What I can think of is the possibility that there was another Shiki separate from Gigorou-san. A Shiki infiltrated the village. Or Yamairi, you could say. They attacked Gigorou-san, attacked Hidemasa-san, attacked Mieko-san."
"Is all I can think but.... Then, what about Gigorou-san going out? Is that unrelated?"
Toshio groaned. "I have no damned idea."
Seishin nodded, once again following through his memory.
"Gotouda Shuuji-san heard that Hidemasa-san was sick and went from Chigusa to Yamairi. At that time, Mieko-san was already in

bad condition, and it's estimated that Hidemasa-san was already dead. And yet Shuuji-san didn't report anything about their state. And as soon as he returned from Yamairi, he was bedridden."
"As expected it's Yamairi. There was a Shiki there. They attacked Shuuji-san. The Shiki can manipulate their victims. So Shuuji-san didn't say anything. Is that it?"
"It might be. The same for Mieko-san. And so she didn't report Hidemasa-san's death to anybody..."
"Gigorou-san and Hidemasa-san might have been dead by the time that Shuuji-san had gone to Yamairi but since they left behind rotting corpses, the two weren't Shiki. Mieko-san wasn't yet dead. As expected somebody besides those three had to be in Yamairi at the time. They attacked the Gotouda's Shuuji-san."
"Probably so. And then Shuuji-san died. From there, Hirosawa Takatoshi-san and Shimizu Megumi-chan. Yasumori Giichi-san. Gotouda Fuki-san. Shimizu Ryuuji-san. Yasumori Nao-san."
"At the very least, Giichi-san and Megumi-chan didn't go to Yamairi. Yeah, that's why we couldn't confirm a contamination route. There wasn't any single point of contact between the victims. We thought there might be an intermediary carrier animal but that might've been right in a way.
By now this disease is spreading through the whole village. It's spreading too evenly. It should be spreading out to the surrounding areas. And yet the only one from Maruyasu to have an outbreak is Giichi-san. If if spread directly, we could think that Giichi-san caught it from Nao-san. Why not from the family but Nao-san? The family definitely had more physical contact with him by far. And from Nao-san was Susumu-kun, Mikiyasu, all three of them had the outbreak. I'd understand if it were the opposite. If Maruyasu had four cases, the contractors one. But that wasn't the case. Each time this pathogen transmites, it's incredibly choosy of its victims.
But if we think that the intermediary carrier takes on human form and has a will like that of a person, it's only natural it'd be choosy. For some reason at Maruyasu the only one they could attack was Giichi-san. No, if we think of the even way it'd been spreading, they chose their victims without any trend. But there were circumstances driving for an attack on the contractors. So only the contractors had a strange tendency present itself."
"Circumstances driving for an attack..."
"I don't know what those were, but. Just, there is one thing that I

can confirm. Shuuji-san was attacked at Yamairi. After that Mieko-san died and the households in Yamairi died out. The stage moved from Yamairi to the village as a whole. At that point, the Shiki moved from Yamairi into the village," Toshio said, nodding to himself. "They moved in. Into the village."
"They moved in?"
"The bunch at Kanemasa. Can you think of anyone else? A master who never shows himself in midday, only showing himself at night. And on top of that, what other purpose would there be to put in that secretive Western style house high up with bad lighting?"
"That's wrong," Seishin reflexively denied. "That can't be it. ---That's right, the people of the Kirishiki family moved in after the bodies were found in Yamairi. They weren't here before that. Didn't resident officer Takami-san confirm that himself?"
"The point of the attack was at Yamairi. Weren't they hiding in Yamairi? They might have even been at Mieko-san's place."
"None the less."
"No--if they could do that much, then there'd be no reason to reconstruct that grandiose house, making themselves stand out in a bad way, would there? Then it's possible that bunch needs that house. Indeed Takami-san said it seemed like there was no one there. Most of all because the meter didn't move at all. But if they're Shiki, would they even need to use electricity or gas or water? For a human even just going into hiding for a few days with absolutely no electricity or water would be next to impossible. All the more for the intense heat wave we were in. But if you really want to hide yourself, even a human could use candles or bring in water from elsewhere, couldn't they? So all the more if they're not human, the meter not moving isn't proof of anything."
"But."
"There're ghost stories, right? Saying they saw figures that shouldn't be there, that they heard sounds. Maybe those were the real truth. To start with the bunch of them got into Yamairi. The three victims and the six members of the Kirishiki family. Some of them might have went into Yamairi, the other might have gone into the mansion, or they all might have already been at the mansion and moved to Yamairi. That's why ever since the three died in Yamairi, there've been signs of people in the mansion, couldn't that be the case? Because since that point they had already been in there. And littel by little they've been attacking the village. There are

ostensibly victims from before the bunch of them moved in. Not just Shuuji-san, but starting with the old lady from Maebara, the strange moves."
"That's..."
"And then when a certain number of victims have sprung up, they can move in showily. That itself is just like you said, at the time the first run of deaths started, they have the alibi of being out of the village, so they made all the more of a show about moving in. And then Takatoshi-san was attacked, Megumi-chan wasa ttacked, Giichi-san was attacked. ---The night Megumi-chan went missing, she was last seen going up the hill towards Kanemasa. It's possible Megumi-chan went all the way to the Kanemasa mansion. When she came out to go back home she loitered around and lost her way. If that wasn't it, then she was thrown out while unconscious. Abandoned far enough away from the mansion in the mountains that it wouldn't be suspicious."
"None the less," Seishin murmured realizing he had no real verbal retreat.
"If we say that there are Shiki, Sotoba would be the ideal place to increase their numbers. Most of all because we still bury. If someone's cremated, there shouldn't be any opportunity to rise up. Right, if there are a bunch like the Shiki, that might be why we didn't know about them. Cremation would be a cultural deterent to them. As long as there're no special circumstances, they wouldn't be able to rise up. So their numbers are extremely low. They couldn't build the numbers to show themselves to people."
"Yes.... That might be it... but."
"But the village buries. And the graves are spread out across the mountains. If they're sloppy, someone might be sighted rising up. For them the village's backwards customs probably worked out just perfectly for them," Toshio said sardonically only to cut himself up, making a face as if he'd remembered something suddenly. "That's it.The mushiokuri."
"....Eh?"
Toshio leaned forward slightly, looking to Seishin's face. "The day of the mushiokuri, a truck came and turned back."
Seishin tilted his head. Come to think of it, there was talk about that. Before he could ask if that was it, Toshio nodded in confirmation.
"That was the start of it. The mushiokuri is a ritual to drive out evil

spirits and wickedness. Just then the Shiki just happened to come along, in other words. They tried to come into the village but they couldn't. I think that's it, that they can't come in someplace if they aren't invited."
Just as he was about to call it ridiculous Seishin lost his argument. Indeed the mushiokuri was a ritual to exorcise evil. The impurities of the village were transferred to the traveler's guardian deities at the boundary, brought out of the village, worshiped and thrown out. Yes, the village had boundaries. Within the boundaries was the "inside" and beyond the boundary was the outside. The mushiokuri prevented the evil spirits from outside from invading and drove out those from within to that outside. If indeed vampires did exist, if they couldn't come "inside" without an invitation, then it mightn't it have been the case that they likewise couldn't enter "inside" the village without an invitation either?
"So the bunch turned back. And then they called Gigorou-san "outside." I don't know how but they had Gigorou Jii-san invite them in. And then they came in."
"You don't know how," Seishin started to say when a meaningless fragment of his memory was found. "The traveler's guardian deities... were broken."
"Eh?"
Seishin pressed a finger to his forehead lightly. A faded red color was revived within his mind. A small hokora in Yamairi. Knocked over, the head knocked off of the stone Jizo and its red apron. Here and there throughout the village for some reason there was a string of destruction of the traveler's guardian deities.
"The traveler's guardian dieties were broken. Possibly, from within the village."
"That right? Then the boundary would be broken. The bunch of them cleared out the screening devices. And then they moved in. To the village."
---I do believe that any human can understand the feeling that they have been abandoned by God.
Seishin hung his head. Toshio continued to pile on the words.
"If that's the case, magic's effective. It figures They tried to come into the village from the front and ended up in a deadlock with the mushiokuri and failed. The village that protects its religious zeal with anachronistic burial customs is at the same time protected by the kind of religious zeal that keeps the mushiokuri going. So the

bunch couldn't come in. So they called Gigorou-san out, attacked him, and had themselves invited. They can manipulate people to their will. Otherwise there's no explanation for the resignations.
It's possible that that's not related to the extreme emotional blunting that takes place. The patients always made a face like it was someone else's problem. They were indifferent to their own condition. Setsuko-san said she saw Nao-san come back to her in a dream. If Nao-san became a Shiki and was coming to visit Setsuko-san, to the victims reality might've been made to take on that kind of feel. They lose their sense of being able to recognize reality, feeling like it's more like a dream. In a dream, the younger wife of the family who should have been dead throws a pebble at the window. The victim doesn't have a clear consciousness. Lost at the boundary of a dream ant reality they go with it. Almost like they're possessed."
Seishin hung his head.
(Sunako... You're.)
"That's it," Toshio's voice rose. "That car."
"....Car?"
"That hit the boy from Shimo-Sotoba. The driver was like he was drunk the story went, right? The driver had an outbreak. He was a victim. Just like a lot of the victims were manipulated to turn in their resignations, they had him drive the car to Yamairi. And there they called Gigorou-san out and attacked him. And then they got their invitation. At that point the traveler's guardian deities weren't broken yet. If they had an invitation that might invalidate any protection by the deities but since they went and destroyed the bounsads afterwards, it must still hinder them somehow after all. In that case they shouldn't be able to just come into the village from the front with just an invitation. It's possible they used another route---a forest path to cross the mountains to get directly into Yamairi. In that case, Gigorou-san destroyed the jizo in Yamairi to help them."
"When there the village guardian deities...?"
"That was at the start of August. Just around that time someone had contracted the disease. ---Shuuji-san."
How's that, Toshio seemed to want to brag with the satisfied smile Seishin saw rise to his face. Seishin couldn't answer.
She understood the feeling of being abandoned by God, Sunako said.

---No doubt because Sunako was a being who was "abandond by God."

sinnesspiel

6

"Smells good."

Ritsuko turned to face the voice behind her. Her sister Midori was in the kitchen doorway, poking her head through the string beaded curtain. "What're you making at this hour? A late night snack?"

"Yup," Ritsuko answered while cutting off the crust of the sandwiches. "But since it's not for you or me, no picking away at it with your fingers."

Ritsuko swatted at Midori's hand that was already stretched out to do so.

"Cheapskate."

"It's for the doctor, he's staying over night at work. The contractors' madamde's been hospitalized, and she has been for a while. So, I'll make something up."

"The madame's sick too now? What's wrong with that family? One after another."

Mm, Ritsuko nodded. Would Yasumori Setsuko die too, then? If that happened then the only one left would be Yasumori Tokujiro. What a bleak prospect.

"But making up something for him, you're dedicated, too, Onee-chan."

"There isn't anybody in charge of meals there. His wife isn't the type to do something like this and all."

"The Junior Wife? So she's back."

"Seems so."

"How nice for her. Just coming and going when she feels like me. I want a husband as understanding as that too." By her tone Midori's words weren't too serious. "But at least the Big Madame would feed him something simple wouldn't she? Since it is her own son. There's not really a reason for Onee-chan to have to go that far."

"That might be the case," Ritsuko said with a smile, sure that that wouldn't be so this time. It'd be one thing if Toshio were just staying overnight, but Seishin was with him. Takae would probably pretend not to notice as usual. "Well, it's fine isn't it? It'll at least be a midnight snack."

Midori wore a coquettish expression as she peered at Ritsuko's face. "Onee-chan, you sure are nice to the doctor, aren't you?"

"Well of course I am. It affects things like advancement and bonuses," Ritsuko said, her voice lowering. "Mom can hear, can't she? Stop it."

"Got it," Midori said sticking out her tongue.

Ritsuko turned to look back but didn't see any sign of her mother peeking into the kitchen. There was the sound of the television, and light snoring heard during its lulls. She must have been dozing. Making sure of as much, Ritsuko quickly wrapped the sandwiches in aluminium foil. Putting soup into a pot would be a bit much, so he'd just have to suffer with instant.

"I'll be getting into the bath when I get back so leave the water in for me."

"Right, right. Take care."

Nodding to Midori who waved her off, putting the wrapped up lunches in another paper bag, Ritsuko left the house through the kitchen door. Tarou poked his face out from the dog house door.

"You want to come for a walk too?" She spoke to him but Tarou

curled his rail and drew back, fleeing inside his dog house. She could hear a short weak, pathetic whining voice through his nose.

She was heading out at night and her thin jacket wasn't quite enough. It was the time of year when at dawn and dusk there was a distinct chill in the air. The way the heat was drawn out from one's body was similar to the sensation of losing something, and so the deeper they went into the Fall season, the more a forlorn feeling overtook her.

(It feels hopeless...)

Trying to put it into words in her mind, it felt all the more like she was being pursued. Her jacket was a bit thin. There was no sign of anyone's presence nor shadow on the night roads of the sleeping village. If only she'd thought of it a little sooner. If she had, she wouldn't have had to walk this road in the middle of the night. No, maybe instead it'd have been better if she had Midori or Tarou along with her.

Ritsuko suddenly realized that her eyes had been scanning her surroundings, unintentionally alert.

---Why are the roadways so scary at night lately?

No, the question was why was it that were people afraid of the darkness of the night to begin with. It wasn't known that dangers lurked in darkness. But if that was said to be scary then behind one's self in the daytime should have been just as scary. Behind one's self, behind cover, there were countless places that one couldn't see. None the less they weren't thought of as scary. People feared the night. Right--"As if in the ancient past, man had a natural predator, as if it were nocturnal, as if it were a remnant of that time."

She realized her pace was quickening. She could feel something hot on the back of her neck and her feet hurried as if fleeing that.

(There's no reason for this... It isn't that far at all!)

The road she was used to walking was only about a fifteen

minute walk. There shouldn't have been anything scary about it. This was in the village, not some back alleyway in the city.

Going past the front of the temple she approached the hill road to the Maruyasu sawmill. There was a street light at the top of the hill, in front of the sawmill's office front, and beyond that the light in front of the hospital's entryway was lit. Ritsuko jogged up the hill, taking a breath beneath the street light. The Ozaki Hospital was right before her eyes. There was a light on in one room of the second floor but it was leaking out from the closed blinds. It was from the second story corner room--the nurse station. Confirming that she took in a deep breath.

(What's the matter with me?)

Even now Ritsuko gave herself a bitter smile. It was strange for her to be so fearful like a child. Gripping the paper bag in her hand, Ritsuko walked out along the remaining path. It was then that she saw something white just within her field of view.

Despite feeling just a moment ago so much as if she would run into something, in an instant as short as that breath she had taken, with the familiar hospital building there before her eyes, strangely it floated to her consciousness as something that might have been something ordinary. Ritsuko thought, as if it were incredibly natural, that somebody was there.

(At this hour.)

How unusual it was, to see a shadow walking through the Maruyasu Sawmill's lumberyard. Who could it be, likely Junko, right? --Though Junko came to mind there was no particular reason. It was just that since that was the Maruyasu Sawmill lot, thinking it must have been somebody from the Maruyasu Sawmill, Junko happened to be the one who most easily came to her mind from that group.

When she stopped to look more closely, it was indeed a young woman. As she wondered why Junko was walking in the lumberyard at this hour, in the next moment she realized it wasn't Junko. Junko had short hair. If nothing else could be told, that

person had long hair.

The figure went out past the lumberyard drawing closer towards the hospital, going around towards the back of the building. Was it Ozaki Kyouko then? she thought.

As Ritsuko tilted her head, what's this? she thought.

(If it isn't the young madame. It is.)

It's Nao-san, Ritsuko thought while at the same having an uncomfortable feeling. The figure disappeared behind the back of the building.

(But.... The Yasumori's Nao-san is...)

She'd suddenly felt as if her spine were stroked by ice.

(Nao-san is...)

She couldn't move her legs. Her knees were shaking. (That's stupid.) That couldn't be. It was just a person who looked like her. (Surely, yes.)

But Ritsuko did not want to move from that place. Just a little bit further ahead of her was the Ozaki Clinic's entryway light. She wanted to try racing to its refuge in one breath but the front entrance was locked. With only the key to the side entrance, she would have no choice but to walk the dark, narrow path with no signs of people at the bank of the building or to across the parking lot, walking the roadway between the building and the hedges filled with obstacles, to get to the back of the building. Towards where that person who looked like Nao but no doubt had to be a completely different person had disappeared to.

Ritsuko had tried twice to direct her feet in that direction.

---It's no good, I can't.

No matter what she could not set foot on that causeway. Countless times unconsciously changing her grip on the paper sack, she retreated. (This can't be.) Taking refuge beneath the Sawmill's

lamp light, gazing towards the causeway, she then turned her body and rushed down the hill. (……But.) she thought while determining that she would never again go out walking in the middle of the night like this.

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7

Seishin suddenly came to his senses. Having lost his sense of orientation for a moment he looked about. In a small room with white walls, across from him before the door was Toshio at his post with his head hung where he sat. He must be tired, so he tried not to wake him but at the same time he'd realized he himself had been tired and had fallen asleep.

At the very least he had to be awake, he thought. When his eyes roamed the recovery room door was open. The last time Toshio had gone to check on Setsuko, the door had been open so that it would be heard if anything were to happen. The dark room was narrowly partitioned off by the white screen.

There was nothing abnormal, not a thing.

Straining his ears, he realized he heard the faint sound of a pulse and oxygen but at the same time he was aware that such sounds shouldn't reach the station room. He was still half in a dream. He had to wake up.

Seishin's head was still in his arms as he turned his eyes to the coffee maker. --Or rather, he intended to turn his eyes towards it.

(I'll at least make coffee...)

Wake up, stand up, set the beans, pump the water. That would wake him up, certainly. While deciding to do as much, Seishin's eyes were closed. His body moved as if packed under dirt, as if held in place by prudence.

While thinking he had to awaken, Seishin was drawn deeper into sleep. This isn't good, the thought floated to mind like a bubble just

before Seishin felt the wind blow through.

The wind blew in quietly from the darkness of the recovery room. It flowed into the station room and swished through warmly and disappeared.

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Rokuyou

- The Six Days of the Week

While Japan operates under the solar Gregorian Calendar, in the Meiji Restoration the Rokuyou or six day lunisolar calendar was popularized for astrological purposes. The six days go in the order given below, with the first of the Gregorian calendar month corresponding with the day in a cycle. For example, the first day of the first month of the year, January, will always be the first day in the list below (Senshou), the first day in the second month of February will always be the second (Tomobiki), the first day of the sixth month, June, will always be the sixth day (Shakkou). Then it starts over again with the first day of July always being the first (Senshou) again, with the first day of December again being the sixth (Shakkou).

In **3-3-2**

, Matsuo Seiji states to Seishin that despite the next day being Tomobiki, they would like to hold Motohashi Tsuruko's funeral as quickly as possible regardless. According to the Rokuyou calendar, there are auspicious and inauspicious times to undertake certain tasks. This system isn't terribly prevalent in modern day Japan, but it does have some influence for more superstitious sorts. Most

calendars will not denote these details, though which one each date falls on can be calculated without.

Senshou - *Preceding Victory*

- Good luck in the morning, bad luck in the afternoon l. A good day for beginnings, in the morning.

Tomobiki - *Pulling Along a Friend*

- Lucky in the morning and night, unlucky from noon to dusk. According to some it means calamity and misfortune bring friends (more misery) and according to some, it's the second luckiest aside from Taian. Particularly bad for funerals, implying the friend will be pulled into death.

Senbu - *Preceding Loss*

- Bad luck in the morning, good luck after noon. A day to avoid hasty judgments.

Butsumetsu - *Buddha Perishes*

- Overall bad luck, unpopular for weddings or business launches. Sometimes appropriate for funerals.

Taian - *Great Ease*

- A lucky day, popular for many undertakings such as weddings and mergers.

Shakkou - *Red Opening*

- Unlucky except for between 11AM and 1PM. Considered worse luck than even Butsumetsu. The red indicates a need to be especially careful of fire or blood drawing injuries.

3 - 5
Honzen

- The Honzen is the central feature of a family altar, usually a statue of the Buddha but sometimes also a scroll or painting. Ozaki bringing it out of his family altar to Setsuko's bedside would be considered sacrilege to more traditional folk.

3 - 6
"I'll be getting into the bath when I get back so leave the water in for me."

- Japanese baths tend to leave water in them more like a simmering hot tub for relaxation than the western baths refilled and drained between each. The bath is kept warm and full until the entire household has finished bathing. There's usually a small, quick showering area for rinsing off dirt and actually cleaning one's self before getting into the bath.

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1

When Seishin opened his eyes again, his watch read 5:00AM. He realized he'd he'd ended up sleeping for about three hours.

When he turned to look towards the recovery room, darkness lurked beyond the privacy screen. Seishin woke himself with a vague feeling of unease.

There was still time before dawn broke. It was natural for it to be dark. Toshio was the one who had turned off the lamp, around 2:00 when he'd gone to check on her; he'd turned out the light and instead left the door open. Nothing had changed since the last time he'd looked. He shouldn't have been feeling that unease.

In spite of a stiffness in his joints Seishin rose with a frown. It's really cold, he thought. While walking towards the recovery room, he felt an extremely cold breeze flowing. And then, the strangely clear sound of the outdoors. The sound of the wind which may or may not have been blowing through trees. --The sound of the wind.

Seishin's eyes widened. He realized the source of his unease. The wind was blowing. Rushing into the recovery room, the first thing he took note of was the open ventilation window.

(The window is open--Why?)

Toshio didn't open it. While thinking that his gaze ran about, Setsuko not seen lying in the bed.

"Setsuko-san?"

The recovery room had a door that went not to the nurse's station but directly to the hallway. That door, too, was open. Everything

was wide open, the cold wind passing through the open corridor.

He wasn't supposed to sleep. With bitter regret, he woke Toshio.

"Toshio, Setsuko-san's gone."

Toshio sprung from the chair he'd been sleeping in looking at Seishin as if it didn't make sense.

"...Gone?"

"She's gone. The window's open. The hallway door, too."

Toshio rushed into the recovery room. The bed was like an abandoned snake skin. Above the white sheets, the juzu beads Toshio had her hold was deserted. Indeed the window was open. The door to the hallway was open and there was no sign of Setsuko to be seen. Rushing into the hall and looking left and right, there was no Setsuko.

"Toshio."

Turning when Seishin called to him, he saw Seishin pointing with a stiff expression to the table at the bedside. That was where the Buddha Toshio had brought from his house should have been. The honzen, the flower vase, the incense. They weren't there.

Hurrying back in, he looked about near the bedside table but he didn't see any of them.

"I'm sorry... I ended up sleeping," Seishin murmured, but Toshio didn't have any right to blame him in the first place either.

"Check the second floor."

Nodding at what he was told, Seishin hurried further down the second story. Toshio left the recovery room, checked the operating room and from the small subsection of the nurse's station he peered towards the back steps. A cold wind passed up from the downstairs. Toshio was halfway down the back steps when saw the staff entrance was open. Wedged in the half opened backdoor, upon the entryway floor he could see the lower half of a woman's body in

bedclothes.

He hurried the rest of the way down the stairs. Without a doubt it was Setsuko. Setsuko had fallen, halfway out the building. He hurried to take her pulse but he couldn't detect one by touch.

Turning as he heard a sound behind him he saw Seishin standing there with the color drained from his face. "Setsuko-san is..."

Toshio shook his head.

(She shouldn't be.)

Until yesterday she'd been showing signs of recovery. her vital signs were stable, returning to normal bit by bit. Even her anemia was improving, and her consciousness was clarifying. No matter how he looked at it she shouldn't have died this suddenly.

Toshio grabbed the flashlight set above the shoe rack and shined it about. Gravel was spread out around the staff entrance. It looked like it had been heavily used but nothing could be said for certain. He shined the light further out. On the dirt rising up the causeway it indeed looked like there had been footprints. And there something glistened. Something was reflecting the flashlight's light.

Toshio went outside. He shined the light around the thick shrubbery through the area. What caught the light had been a small golden honzen. The incense burner was found not far away, along with the flower vase. When he looked back, above his head was the open ventilation window. The window to the recovery room.

"They're here?" Seishin's dubious voice came from behind him. Toshio nodded. They were thrown out the window. That was the only thing he could think, looking at the set up. On the ground about were the ashes of the incense burner. There footprints could be seen.

"They weren't alone..."

Toshio shined the light over the scattered footprints for him to see. Clearly there were at least three different shoe sole designs there. It wasn't that the ashes were scattered over footprints.

Somebody had stepped on top of the ash, and if so it was something that happened around dawn.

"Somebody came at dawn. And not alone, probably several."

Toshio turned back towards Setsuko who had fallen in the staff entrance. Setsuko was recovering bit by bit. She had to have around 500ml of blood in her still. At the very least she shouldn't have suddenly died.

"The bunch of them came to take care of her in one go, huh?"

"Toshio."

Seishin spoke as if surprised, Toshio urging him on. "For the time being let's carry Setsuko-san into the hospital room. Give me a hand."

Dumbfounded, Seishin watched as Toshio examined Setsuko's corpse.

"No particular signs of blood loss. No outer wounds that are obvious, and I can't see any signs of major symptoms." Toshio said while settling Setsuko into the futon. "The cause is unclear, is what I want to say, but. It's probably blood loss, I'm sure."

Toshio lightly pointed to Setsuko's arm. In her left elbow were red several nodes, as if piled on top of each other.

Seishin sat back in the bedside chair. If he hadn't fallen asleep, he found himself thinking, unable to lay enough blame on himself. That he was tired didn't even begin to serve as an excuse. Both himself and Toshio were beyond admitting they were tired. They should have planned their rotations better. They should have at least taken up post right at Setsuko's bedside. Once he began to think of regrets, there was no end to them.

There was a hard, metalic sound. It was the sound of Toshio knocking over the flower vase.

"Who threw this out?!" Toshio murmured. "The window was locked from the inside. The hallway side door too. As long as

nobody went through the office into the room someone had to open it from the inside and the only one who could do that is Setsuko-san!"

Seishin nodded.

--But somebody could have invaded by going through the office. Seishin couldn't definitively declare that that would have definitely woken him up. But would anybody have the mental fortitude to be able to pass through two tentatively sleeping men to sneak into the recovery room? Supposing that they did, that still didn't establish that that somebody who had did not have a human mentality.

"The staff entrance would have been locked from the inside too. It should have been locked up."

"You didn't confirm that it was actually locked. It's possible Ritsuko-san had forgotten. or possibly when I met her as she was leaving she left it open thinking I would be going out."

"That's not impossible. But at least as far as the recovery room goes, the door and window had to be opened by Setsuko-san. A person couldn't come or go through the window. This's the second story, and even using a chair, the window wouldn't open enough for an adult to get in."

Toshio leaned against the wall and cast his eyes down. "...Setsuko-san was probably called out by somebody. It's possible she thought she was dreaming."

"Setsuko-san's consciousness was clear."

That's right, Toshio said with a sigh. "Was their power of suggestion already that strong on her? Or possibly it was because she was mentally clear that she couldn't ignore somebody calling to her. Either way, Setsuko-san opened the door and the back door. Setsuko was healthy enough that she could do as much."

"Who threw the Buddha?"

"Don't know that one. ...But, they came in numbers. That said, Setsuko-san's condition was pretty good, so unless she was being

manipulated, she wouldn't open the door to invite several people in. Even the two of us would have noticed if several people came in no matter what."

I'm not so sure of that, Seishin thought but didn't voice that opinion. He couldn't call it absolute but indeed as far as possibilities went, the likelihood that they'd have woken up was much higher.

"The reason they came in numbers was probably to get her in one go. Setsuko-san was hospitalized, so they couldn't mess with her too easily. So they couldn't do a drawn out attack. But they couldn't have a big crowd fall in on her either. So one of them must have come in first. If that wasn't it, they called Setsuko-san out." Toshio tilted his head. "Was it Setsuko-san who threw the Buddha, or was it the invader... Maybe, one of them came in to the hospital, noticed it and threw it out. In either case, it being there was inconvenient."

Seishin didn't answer. The possibilities were limitless. As it was, they could only talk of what they imagined.

"What the two of us do know is the odds of Buddhist altar equipment being inconvenient for them. Thinking about the Mushiokuri and the traveler's guardian dieties, their magic's effective too. ...Probably."

"That's right."

"And after all they do have human limitations to their movement. They can't climb walls or turn into smoke to get into a room. She was isolated in the hospital, and they were under pressure from the night watches. That much is human. ...Other than that, there's no limit to what they could possibly be."

Seishin nodded.

"....We have to contact Tokujiro-san."

"Aa..." Toshio mumbled despondently. "We'll try digging up Nao-san's grave after all."

Seishin couldn't voice his protests anymore.

"When're you free?"

"Today I'll have Setsuko-san's mourning. Afterwards, there will be a few services. I think that I can have Tsurumi-san or somebody switch with me for Setsuko-san's vigil."

"It'd be bad to do it midday. There's the chance someone would be coming to the graveyard to get ready for the burial."

"At night?"

Toshio looked at Seishin who asked him that, nodding wordlessly.

"....If we dig up the grave tonight, the traces might be seen when doing Setsuko-san's burial."

"There's no choice is there? We can't wait until Setsuko's buried," Toshio said with a dry laugh. "I mean we could try to use an endoscope or something but I can't say I wanna put it to that use. Even with that we'll have to completely demolish the grave, so if we're in we're all in."

Understood, was all that Seishin murmured.

sinnesspiel

2

"The wife from the Yasumori's passed away, you said?" Kiyomi said as soon as she entered into the break room. Within the breakroom were only Ritsuko, Satoko and Yasuyo. It seemed Mutou was talking with Toshio about what to do with Setsuko, so Kiyomi must have heard about Setsuko from Yuki.

"Even though she was doing so well again, too!" Kiyomi breathed a sigh.

Really, Yasuyo agreed as she wiped with a dust cloth. "I'd thought it might have even been cured this time too, but. It must mean it really is over for those who have that, huh?"

As she was murmuring the phone rang. Ritsuko who was the closest picked up the receiver. This is Towada, said a voice sounding strange as if through grit teeth. Come to think of it, they hadn't seen him yet today, Ritsuko realized at that moment.

"Uhm... I'm sorry, I, quit."

Eh, Ritsuko asked back in surprise.

"Please tell the doctor. ...I'm scared. I don't want to be in the village anymore."

Ritsuko was startled. At the word 'scared', the white human figure she'd seen the night before crossed through her mind but she lightly shook her head so as not to remember it.

"I am really sorry. Please forgive me."

Ritsuko didn't know what to say to him. She couldn't very well blame Towada. He was on the front lines. Ritsuko and the other

nurses knew as much in their own way. They knew what they should and shouldn't be going, and even if it were an unknown disease, it wasn't the same thing as some kind of monster. But Towada who worked in the office couldn't know that the same way.

"....I understand. But, if you could, please contact the doctor with this. If it's hard to say, then even by letter..."

I will, Towada said, hanging up the phone. Ritsuko also put the phone back on as the three faces in the room looked to her.

"It was Towada-san. ... It seems he's quitting."

Kiyomi let out a large sigh as she say down in the chair. "Good grief. I feel sorry for Mutou-san too. Things had just lightened up for him with Shizuko-san coming in to help him, too."

"You said it," Yasuyo nodded. "Even so, if we did try to make him stay, on the off chance something did happen, we would be the ones who would end up responsible though, huh?"

Speaking as if talking to herself, she threw down the dust cloth as a washed out feeling came over her.

"It's the sickness," Kiyomi said with her chin in her hands. "To be honest, they're felling me at my house to quit, too."

"Well dear me."

"My husband has been. ... It's become a rumor lately you know, that there's a disease spreading. When he asked me what that was about, even I couldn't not say that t might just be the case now could I? Since then, he's always: 'Couldn't you quit?' We have a child too, who's still young. When he asks if it's really safe and gets pushy about it, I don't really have an answer."

"It's not for nothing, I see where your husband's coming from. To start with even if you don't work, you'd at least have enough to get by on."

"That's right. Even I think whether to keep working or not or whether to just depend on my husband. Either way, if I was going

to become a burden on him, to the point where I'd quit, I could find another job as a nurse, he's even said."

"If only we at least knew the way it spread. We're of course being careful but. Or else knowing how to treat it, knowing it could be cured, that would be something at least."

"That's right. The Yasumori's wife seemed to be doing well, so I'd been counting on that much but."

"It's fatality rate is one hundred percent isn't it, right now. I'm scared too! Wakingup feeling sluggish, why, I've certainly suffered as much!"

Ritsuko nodded internally to their conversation, but she couldn't forget the figure she'd seen the night before. It resembled Nao, someone who couldn't have been Nao. Disappearing towards the hospital, and then Setsuko died---.

"Really, I wonder if it is an epidemic disease at all..." Ritsuko said without thinking. Kiyomi and Yasuyo looked blankly at her. Rather, the one who nodded was Isaki Satoko.

"Like, something about it being an epidemic seems off, doesn't it. Don't you feel that way too?"

Kiyomi and Yasuyo looked to each other. Ritsuko was surprised enough that Satoko had nodded.

"Uhm, Sato-chan? I was just talking for the sake of it, so..."

"Is that so? I for one think that it feels a little strange. This morning, when the doctor called me into Setsuko-san's sick room, it smelled like incense."

"That's...." Yasuyo blinked. "That's because she was dead."

"That's right. That's why I thought that the doctor had lit it for Setsuko-san's sake at the time. But there was no incense burner. Like it had already been put away. If he was burning incense, wouldn't he leave it to burn until the family came for the body?"

"Well... That's true, too."

"Everybody took part in the post-death treatments. Even though he could have just left it to us. To start with, isn't it a little strange that the doctor said we didn't need to take shifts once Setsuko-san was hospitalized? Even though he had the Junior Monk help when the Junior Monk can't do anything. If there was anything to have him do, it would be too important for him."

"That's true," Yasuyo said, as Ritsuko interrupted.

"About that, it looks like that wasn't the case. Yesterday, I'd asked him about that."

Ritsuko explained that Seishin had come asking for Toshio's help and so that was why he was staying with him while he was on duty but Satoko made a stern expression at that.

"Then isn't that even more strange? He went through the trouble of having the patient hospitalized, and wasn't that so he wouldn't take his eyes off of her? To think, he'd casually chat about a novel like that!"

"Was it something that severe?"

"If it wasn't there'd be no reason to hospitalize her would therE?"

"I wonder if it wasn't just to see how the disease progressed? More than to try to treat or cure the patient," Yasuyo said, but Satoko shook her head.

"Even so something feels strange. Suddenly, he tried hospitalizing Setsuko-san, and yet he says we don't need to do shifts. Without a word to any of us though, he has an amateur, a monk, accompany him on the shifts. Suddenly there're fewer observation notes---lately, I don't know what's going through the doctor's head."

Yasuyo groaned, Kiyomi tilted her head uneasily. Ritsuko couldn't help but nod. Yes, lately Toshio's words and actions didn't follow any logical path. They couldn't see it any other way.

"...It might not be an epidemic." Satoko murmured.

Kiyomi's voice was low. "Then, poison, for example?"

Satoko glanced up fleetingly at Kiyomi. "....There are The Risen, aren't there?"

Ritsuko felt as if Satoko had taken the words out of her mouth.

"The Risen..."

"That's ridiculous," Kiyomi laughed. "Oh come on. Just when I wonder what you're going to say! Sato-chan, aren't you taking too much after Yuki-chan?"

Satoko turned her eyes towards Kiyomi, staring at her, and then letting out a heavy sigh with a laugh of her own.

"You're right. It's stupid, isn't it?"

Yasuyo broke out into a laugh too. "Oh, I don't know. Maybe the dead really are rising up. And because of that, people are dying, and those dead are rising up, too. Then it would seem like an epidemic, to be certain."

Satoko blushed as if embarrassed as she laughed. "What? So that's why he called in the Junior Monk. To do a prayer."

"If that's it, it's a quick fix," Kiyomi said laughing harder. "We'll just do another mushiokuri. That would settle everything, wouldn't it?"

"Good plan," someone said and the three collapsed into laughter. Ritsuko put on a laughing face but she could feel the stiffness in her expression.

The figure that looked like Nao. Someone who definitely shouldn't have been Nao. Disappearing into the hospital before Setsuko died.

(The Risen....)

Ridiculous, she thought. Hearing the other three laughing, she really did think it was completely ridiculous. Something like that couldn't exist. To think she had been serious about it, it was enough to make her laugh.

(But...)

But still, Ritsuko thought, even as she joined in with the other three, even as her laugh changed to a genuine one.

sinnesspiel

3

Takemura Tatsu was seated at the storefront to her stationary shop as always, gazing towards the village road while trying to pin down her faint sense of malaise. Monday, a holiday. The elementary school children were having an athletic meet. The enthusiastic voices and noises carried to the shopfront. As usual Hirosawa Takeko and Ohkawa Namie were loitering about, with Itou Ikumi being the only oddity today having come just to belittle their conversation. It was all the same as ever, and yet she couldn't help feel that something was different.

--Feels like there aren't enough people.

So Tatsu concluded. That morning the number of children heading to school seemed just a little too few. She also couldn't help feeling that the number of parents or siblings along with them was too low. That wasn't all, if today was a holiday, there should have been plenty of cars going along the village road towards Mizobe or even further out and yet despite it being the traveling season, she thought there were too few of those too.

Not just today. Far from it, she'd thought the number of cars commuting to work had decreased too. She couldn't help think that the numbers riding the bus towards the high school, towards their jobs were dwindling.

Unable to say anything for certain, Tatsu never said a word of it to anyone. She couldn't say anything about it beyond as a matter of numbers. Throughout the many years she had become accustomed to the numbers going up or down a step and this was a time when it was going down. She didn't particularly keep count on the rises and falls but in terms of its usual pace of growth or recession, it was still

too few. And so in that gap for how many there should have been was filled with uneasiness. ---It was like that.

With this many funerals, it's only natural, she thought. There were a lot of moves. The village numbers were in fact declining. So it might have been only natural that it felt like they were declining but as she sat watching over it all with her unease, she wondered just how many people had actually left in some form or other.

As she was caught in her thoughts, Sato Oitarou came by. She knew by the way he walked. Oitarou had come to tell them something.

"Tatsu-san, Tatsu-san!" As Tatsu had imagined, before Oitarou had made it to the shop front, his voice was already calling out to her. "Hey, have you heard?"

"Heard what?"

"We're getting an funeral home."

Eh? Tatsu didn't raise her voice often. She'd figured it was another death announcement, or a talk about somebody else moving again. When something completely unexpected was said, she let out her voice.

"See, there was the big woodworking shop in Kami-Sotoba, right? The Hirokane one. The Takemura's who were distant relatives of Kanemasa. The old woman was the last one left and it'd been closed for some time. They say they're putting in a funeral home there. When the woodworkers were meeting up there a bit ago, they said that."

"Mune-san is going to be an undertaker?"

"Naw. Mune-san's going into a home it sounds like. Her legs have been bad for a while, it was real inconvenient on her. They say she's going into a nursing home for old folks. And after that, some male relative came down and started doing front work at the carpentry. The ones contracted were a big company from Mizobe, though, and the foreman in charge of that group said it was gonna be a funeral

home."

Well my, said Takeko, sounding shocked. "An outsider coming to set up funeral services, they won't get any business at all will they?"

"I wonder." It was Ikumi who laughed. "After all, with so many dead."

"Even if there's more than less," Takeko said with a snort through her nose. "In this village, we have the mourning crew."

"No matter how good the morning crew is, having to be drawn up together all the time like this, everyone's done gave up. Either way, it's going to continue after all."

"That's enough," Tatsu interrupted Ikumi. "Don't just say it's going to continue that flippantly. Do you know what it means to show some restraint when people are morning?"

Ikumi laughed as it to make fools of them all even as her mouth closed. Tatsu could feel her own disgust towards that smile. The same discomfort she felt towards the dead and the moves. This was beyond the pale of something one could irresponsibly make a joke of. Something truly not right was happening, really.

Ikumi took a glance at Tatsu who was staring into her face unpleasantly. Tatsu didn't understand. The not a one of the old folks who gathered at Takemura understood. Only she understood the situation, she was certain. Calamity had come to the village. Just as Ikumi had prophesied, this was far from over, most likely. She had such a premonition, so it was surely correct. Just like the one that this summer was going to be horrif.

As she was thinking as much, she saw Ohtsuka Yaeko coming hurrying down the road. Ikumi held a premonition, one saying it was the announcement of a death. No doubt, Yaeko was coming to convey news of someone's death.

The truth was that as Yaeko came to the shop front, she told them that the old woman in Kami-Sotoba was having a funeral service. I knew it, Ikumi thought to nobody in particular, feeling gratified

none the less.

"That's, this is no joke. What is going on, these days." Oitarou seemed sincerely uneasy. Takeko and Namie both looked frightfully at Yaeko who brought the news of death to them.

"Well, didn't I say so?" Ikumi laughed. She must have heard her low voice to herself, as Takeko gave Ikumi a glare.

"If you're going to go on with your grumbling about premonitions, go and do it somewhere else. If I have to believe in any of your nonsense, I'd rather hear about you thinking the Oni have come."

For an instant, Ikumi gave Takeko a sharp look, and then she felt her stomach drop. Kanemasa came and brought the misfortune with them. The trouble on the Kanemasa land had accelerated the tragedy. --That's right, she thought. That's what it was.

"It's The Risen!"

Tatsu looked to the mumbling Ikumi with annoyance. Do you think I care, Ikumi thought. After all Tatsu and the others knew who turned out to be right, didn't they?

Why the Kanemasas only appear at night, why they took the trouble to move in the middle of the night. The lot of them could only go out in the night, because they were Oni. The Risen had entered the village. And thus death was spreading. Those touched by the Oni were revived as Oni, and one after another the living were being---.

(I won't let you do as you please.) Ikumi turned her eyes to the nroth. (You thought nobody noticed but it hasn't gone so smoothly. For this village has in it somebody like myself!)

Ikumi smiled thinly. Seeing that smile, Tatsu was all the more overcome by that revolting feeling. This woman was taking joy in the disaster.

(Oni you say? That's ridiculous.) Tatsu spit out in her thoughts, her gaze returning to the village road. That road that she was

thinking was traveled less and less. (.....Oni.)

But, indeed, it was like they were being ruled over by Oni. Rising up from the graveyard, drawing the living into the mountains. Those pulled into death rose up as Oni and pulled in more still of the living, and thus death was spreading throughout the village.

I see, Tatsu understood. The chain of deaths and the spreading epidemic. Oni was another word for illness. She hadn't heard the rumors of a specific epidemic disease within the village. But these days new strains and diseases were found ofte enough. Like punishment upon corrupt humans, disease of an unknown nature punished mankind.

Is that what it's been, Tatsu thought privately. And there was the Ozaki Clinic which was opened on the weekends now. ---That's what it was.

"Dead, you said? Another one?" Kanami said, her hand stopping in wiping at the counter she stood behind. She watched Motoko look up at her with a bewildered expression as she nodded.

"Yes. The old woman from the Hashimotos. When a neighbor went to check on her, she was dead, they said."

Kanami furrowed her brows. Again. Motoko's father-in-law had just died and even before that she heard incessant talk of funerals. How many days had passed since this summer when a customer

didn't

come into the shop mentioning that somebody had died? Gotouda's son died. The three old people in Yamairi died too. This was obviously too many.

"I've gotten so sick of it. I just had a funeral yesterday." Motoko brooded with a sigh. That's right, Kanami thought. Yesterday, one of Motoko's relatives had a funeral. If she recalled, they lived in Sotoba, the man who worked at the fire station. Motoko's husband Isami, Motoko Isami's cousin had died.

"It's like there really are Oni, carrying people off..." Motoko said

to herself. Seeing Motoko's profile with her usual grave expression rising up, Kanami spoke in an intentionally cheerful voice.

"Oh no you don't. Don't start with that kind of old-woman talk on me now."

That's right, Motoko laughed but as expected her brow was still furrowed with uneasiness.

(.....Oni.)

Kanami looked out the window to the quintessential fall scene. It was a scene no different from any other fall. It hadn't changed since she was a kid. It was peaceful, calm and safe. ---But, where it couldn't be seen, impropriety was occurring. That impropriety was the Oni running rampart.

(It couldn't be...) Kanami kept herself from speaking aloud to Motoko. (An epidemic?)

Kanami swallowed her breath in secret. Everybody had said that it might have been a terrible disease at least once since that summer. But, even while she had said it, Kanami herself hadn't believed it. She just repeated what she heard while thinking it couldn't be so. It wasn't something real enough for her to hesitate in saying it. ---Until now.

If, just maybe. Kanami looked to Motoko's face as she cleaned up.

She couldn't say anything to Motoko. Her father-in-law Iwao had just died. Motoko would probably be filled to the brim with anxiety that it could spread to her children. That worry was something Kanami understood distinctly in regards to her own aging mother.

Her mother Tae was good friends with Gotouda Fuki. Since Fuki had died she had been down, enough to draw compassion from anyone. Would her mother in such a state be all right?

(....She's all right now.)

She should have been. Fuki died in August, and all this time she'd been safe, so without a doubt Tae had averted disaster.

Kanami let out her breath with ease but still she could feel a chill lingering at the base of her spine.

Ikumi returned home from Takemura. Her steps were firm and she felt light footed.

(Oni--It was Oni all along.)

Leaving Takemura, Yaeko followed after Ikumi as if cowering from her surroundings. And doing so she asked if she might not receive an ofuda charm from her, which only served to bolster Ikumi's mood further.

She knew, she grasped the situation. Her confidence reassured, she was haughty. She could distinctly feel something invigorating flowing into her. Her power was flowing. Surely it was for the purpose of confronting the Oni. The only one to see the matter for what it was was Ikumi. And so no doubt she was the only one who could control it.

With the feeling she had received her life's mission, Ikumi returned to her home. Seeing her daughter loitering about absently, she snapped out at her.

"I've got it. It's Oni. As expected, I was right all along."

Her daughter Tamae looked at her blankly. "Mother."

"It's Kanemasa. They're the ringleaders. It's just as I'd said."

Ikumi turned a smile towards her daughter but Tamae blinked several times and then scrunched up her face.

"Oh Mother, please, just stop it already."

"Stop it, you say?"

"Stop it, stop saying things like that."

Ikumi glared at her daughter. She watched her dull-witted face with annoyance as she burst out crying.

"The likes of you couldn't understand. Really, you're a worthless daughter only taking after your father."

"Mother, you're the one who's strange!" Tamae screamed. While sobbing she stomped her foot. "Just let it go already! Do you know what the people of the village say about you and me? Why do I have to become a laughing stock? It's because you say such strange things all the time that I have to..." Tamae fell to her knees on the hard floor. Her voice broke out into a wail. Ikumi watched her with a cold eye.

Her dullwitted simpleton of a husband. He had no particularly redeeming features, and could not avail a single good thing of himself to her. She knew it would come to this. Ikumi had wept when she found she was arranged to marry a man of no sharp wits, short stature, the very picture of mediocrity. Against her will Ikumi was made to wear the white wedding kimono by her parents and set out of her house. Living with her husband was exactly as Ikumi had imagined it would be. It was a life without brilliance or glory. Truly her husband could not convey to her a single wonderful thing within himself. Life in an enclosed village, nitpicking relatives---life was such banalities. Her bright and lovable sons had been born and died without experiencing any of it. The oldest son and the second son who resembled him lived not for even three days. All she had left was her daughter who resembled her father, without a scrap of intelligence, homely and incompetent. When her shackle of a husband had died, Ikumi's life as a woman was over.

(But that isn't the end of everything.)

As if she would let it end with her being disdained and made light of.

Ikumi abandoned Tamae to head more deeply into the house. She began to sort the living room. She could not let those depending on her down. She would prepare, would let the light into her home, would let them know that Ikumi was here.

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4

The head of the funeral procession carried the flag solemnly towards the mountain. Before Kaori's eyes as she watched from a distance, they went up the forest path towards Megumi's grave.

"Let's go, Akira."

Following after Natsuno who took off running, Akira was full of vigor. Kaori followed behind them more reluctantly. As Kaori and the others reached the base of the forest path, the tail of the processin was just rounding the curve. Natsuno motioned for them to go into the woods. Pushing their way through the already withered underbrush, the processin turned towards the curve and had already begun to climb the face of the mountain.

Without using the path, and while trying not to stand out, making as little noise as possible, it was difficult to keep her posture low and follow after the procession. Already her feet and her knees hurt, her clothes were being torn and covered with dead leaves, her limbs being scratched up.

(....This is so stupid), Kaori increasingly thought switching the heavy hoe between her hands.

Why was she even tagging along? Akira had hit it off perfectly with Natsuno and they pushed the conversation along on their own as if they didn't intend to invite Kaori along at all. Climbing up the mountain, digging a hole, if they were doing things like that, they could just get together as boys and do it. Akira had always had a habit of making fun of Kaori, and she had no intent of copying his strange way of looking up to Natsuno.

While Kaori thought that there was another side within her as well. The voice asking her how she could think such careless things. Megumi wasn't there. She rose up.

(What's wrong with that?)

Wasn't that much better than being dead and rotting, she thought. If she rose up it meant Megum hadn't really died. If Megumi was still alive somewhere, Kaori wanted to see her again.

(....Really?)

Megumi was an Oni. If Kaori and Megumi were to meet, that would be when Kaori was captured by the Oni. Putting aside whether she could prove that she definitely wouldn't capture her, if that weren't the reason then they probably wouldn't meet. Kaori didn't want to become an Oni. Dying and rising up might have been different from dying, yes, it might have ultimately meant not being dead but just going through death as the bunch of them did once was scary.

But, for example if Megumi had become an Oni, as long as she didn't come to capture her, wasn't that fine, she thought. If Megumi didn't come to capture Kaori, it just meant that Megumi was "still alive" and nothing more. She thought she died. She thought she was lost, no longer of this world. If that wasn't the case, then she should only be all the more happy to hear it.

(....Really?)

Kaori herself didn't want to become an Oni. If so then Megumi too was probably not very happy about becoming one herself. She didn't want to be an Oni. If Megumi was the same, then this was terrible for her.

(Is that really true?)

Of course it was true. That was all the more reason Kaori hated the people of the Kirishiki household. Whether she rose up or whether she didn't, Megumi was dead. No doubt death was a painful and terrifying thing for even Megumi. And yet she died. The

Kirishiki household attacked and kileld her. If so, she couldn't forgive them she had thought but now that it came to it, she didn't know what she would do with her lack of forgiveness towards them.

She probably meant to get revenge on them (that isn't something I can do). Or did she want them to acknowledge their crime and apologize (that isn't something they can do). Or had she just wanted to lay the blame on them (and what good would doing that do?).

Kaori couldn't sleep last night. Thinking that Megumi was there outside the window, or thinking that she might have come into the house, she was terrified, afraid, she couldn't stand it. Kaori had longed for Megumi, she mourned for her death, and she wished for Megumi to come back any way or any how and yet when she thought that Megumi might have risen up from her grave, that she might appear before her, she was so terrified she couldn't stand it.

(Do I want Megumi to be dead? Or do I want her to be alive?)

She didn't know which she wanted. She didn't know how scary it would be for Megumi to have risen up. In the first place right now was Megumi dead or was she alive? That much wasn't clear, so she didn't know whether it was terrible or not for Megumi.

So just let it go, a part of her thought. Let's say Megumi isn't dead. Isn't that enough, she thought. On the other hand, another part of her said that they couldn't just do that. Just as Natsuno and Akira said, as it was as somebody died, the Oni increased in numbers. If it went on adding up like this, what would happen to the village? And to those who lived there, Kaori, Akira, Kaori's parents?

That was dreadful. So somebody had to stop it. Thinking that, her thoughts cycled back around to the first point.

(But, if you rise up, isn't that the same as being alive?)

As Kaori was spaced out, she almost bumped into Natsuno who had stopped a short ways before her. As Kaori let out a small voice, Natsuno motioned for her to be quiet. The funeral procession was going along the curve of the small pathway. They were going up

rather far past Megumi's grave.

From the forest path that went up along the western mountain, the procession turned about back towards the tail. Making sure the last of them had gone around the curve of the small path, Natsuno stepped out onto the forest path. Continuing towards the entrance of the small path, they entered into the forest just beyond it.

There were already footprints in the forest, and nearby the sound of the funeral bells ceased. They had left the graveyard. The procession worked its way out from the grove of trees, and seeing them gather around the hole, Natsuno pointed to the forest path.

"What's wrong? We're stopping?"

She heard Akira's voice coming out onto the forest path. Natsuno started to climb further up the forest path.

"We can't wait there, can we? We're going to check on the grave, so we'll have to kill some time."

"Ah, that's right."

As Akira nodded with a strange air of admiration, an opening was found a bit ahead on the forest path. It was a plaza for trucks to stop at. There was a piling up of planks of trees that were cut down, though why they were left was unknown.

The birds sang. The wind blew, and a voice could be heard chanting the sutras. When that voice silenced it meant the funeral was over. Kaori listened carefully. The voice was a worn and raspy one. It wasn't the permeating, well-carrying voice of the usual Junior monk. The temple was busy, so the Junior Monk wouldn't come, Kaori's mother had said. Normally when there was a funeral, there were several monks. It seemed like it wasn't often that there was only one but not only did the Junior Monk not come, only one monk came. It meant that with funerals and services, they just didn't have enough staff. The funeral services was late to start too. This too was because of the temple's circumstances. They'd never heard of it being like this, just what is going on, she heard her parents saying as if it were their matter to be indignant about.

(So many funerals....)

If she thought about it, a lot of people had died since summer. Just out of those Kaori knew, with Megumi and Ohtsuka Yasuyuki Hashimoto Tsuruko was the third. And it seemed the three old people from Yamairi had died too, and without a doubt many more people than that had died.

Quite some time passed the time until the sutra chanting voice died out. Natsuno looked at his watch countless times. Not only was he aware of the time, he knew well that the shadows were gradually growing longer, that dusk was approaching the grove of the trees and that night was coming on.

At last the voice reading the sutras ceased, and by the time they heard the voices of those involved in the procession going down, the color of the sky had changed.

Kaori and the others hurried to the graveyard in the woods. When they took a peak, there were still several men left behind cleaning up afterwards. Waiting in the bowers for the men to go down the mountain, at last when there was no sign of anybody, the shadows had coiled about everything.

"What should we do...?" Akira asked Natsuno as he looked around uneasily. Within the woods, they couldn't see through the depths of the underbrush. The sky at least still had traces of red but the graveyard within the tree groves was already faintly dark. There was the piled up mound, and the characters on the mounted wooden sotoba's corners couldn't be read without going right up next to it. Without a doubt if they started to dig up the grave now, it would be too dark to see by the time they got to the coffin.

"Might be better to do this another time, huh? Look, at least we know where the grave is now." Akira said as Natsuno stared fixedly at the Sotoba. And then, resolved, he turned around to face Akira.

"That's enough from you guys, you go home."

"What about you Nii-chan?"

"I'm going to do what has to be done."

But, Akira and Kaori said at the same time. Natsuno distinctly shook his head.

"By tomorrow they might not be here anymore." Natsuno didn't say who. "I have to finish this up tonight."

"Even so, they probably won't rise up tonight." Akira said looking at their surroundings.

"Why?"

"Why? Well---I just figure."

"That's called wishful thinking. You just mean it'll be good if they don't. Things happen that don't go according to plan often enough." Natsuno said while taking the Sotoba in his hand. Unlike Megumi's, this one didn't fall over with just a little shaking.

"Nii-chan, it'd be bad."

"It's fine. You guys go back. If you don't hurry then by the time you get back it'll be dark."

Akira looked to Natsuno with upturned eyes. "No.... If Nii-chan's going it, I'm gonna help too, naturally."

"It's fine, I said go home."

Natsuno began to dig around the Sotoba. Akira continued. "Just so you know, it's not like I'm gonna get scared and freak out if it's in there."

"That isn't what I'm saying. By the time we finish doing this the sun'll set. I'm telling you to go back because it's dangerous."

"It's dangerous for Nii-chan too."

"I'll make it somehow."

"Then we'll make it, too."

But, Kaori started in. "Ne... Let's do it tomorrow."

"If you're scared, you go home. I'll come back when I'm finished helping Nii-chan."

"I don't need you," Natsuno said while digging. The sotoba was starting to waver. "More importantly, you take your sister home. You're not going to send a girl back home alone when it's this dark right?"

Akira gave Kaori a fleeting glance. "She'll be all right. Kaori's not weak, she's got a better constitution than me, actually."

"That's not the problem. There's some people not fit for this." Natsuno stopped, pointing to Kaori. "Your sister, she's already shaking. If something happens, obviously she's going to freeze up and won't be able to move. You said you wouldn't get scared and freak out right? What'll happen if she doesn't have someone like that there."

"If you're gonna put it like that, then Nii-chan can bring Kaori home. You do that and I'll work here by myself until Nii-chan comes back."

"Akira..."

Natsuno sighed. He watched with annoyance as Akira picked up the shovel obstinately.

"I'm all right," Kaori said, gripping the hoe as she did yesterday. "I'll be all right."

So Kaori said but of course she was only acting tough. She was afraid of the dark. It seemed like somebody could already be hiding in the dark, and she tensed every time the wind rang through the branches. And furthermore in that hole---in that coffin, there was sure to be a dead body laid out. To be digging that out, when even just thinking about it was terrifying. But Kaori didn't want to go home alone. She coldn't stand to return home on the dim mountain path where shadows startled her and she tensed at every noise. If it

came to that, then it was better to be here with three people even in the dark. It was better to be together at least until they got to the houses with street lights.

Natsuno sighed and began using the shovel. Kaori began using the hoe desperately. The guilt of the sin of digging up a grave all fell to the wayside before the fear that drove her to want to return to her home safely even one minute sooner.

The ground was softer than it was even when they were doing Megumi's grave. Digging along wasn't so hard, and it was taking less time than it did with Megumi's. Even so the sun was setting fast. The color of the dirt was deep and dark and when she rose her face to wipe at the sweat, the forest around them had grown dim, the view of the cemetery more hazy as if coated in layers of dark ink.

How many times had she looked up? Kaori thought that she'd heard a noise in the nearby underbrush. It was jumbled with the sonds of digging but she thought she had certainly heard the sounds in the thicket. She looked about her surroundings but she couldn't really see through the groves of the trees. She couldn't even see the expressions on Natsuno and Akira who were working next to her.

(Am I imagining it....?)

Kaori looked around several times. Again there was a faint sound from somewhere. She tried to determine where it came from, but she couldn't be sure.

"...What's up?" Akira looked up. She couldn't see his expression but his voice was colored with unease.

"I heard something..."

It was when Kaori said that. Suddenly, the bushes to her right rustled, a figure came rushing at her. Kaori couldn't make a noise, couldn't even prepare herself.

It was a man. Someone she didn't know. A hand stretched out to grab her. A thought flashed across her mind. She should have gone

back, she should have run away, she was going to be caught, she was going to be killed. The hoe in her hand, her feet wouldn't move---.

She was pulled back from behind. The man's hand swiped at emptiness. As Kaori fell on her backside, somebody was standing in her place, and the man was falling over face up. She heard a dull but violent noise and smelled something sour.

The man completely collapsed, unmoving. Natsuno was before the fallen Kaori, his shoulders rising and falling with his breath. He gripped his shovel with both hands.

"What... Hey....!"

Kaori struggled to move. At her side Akira was standing frozen stiff. The man wasn't moving. Kaori grasped Natsuno's arm.

"You.. You hit him? Is he all right?"

Still breathing wildly, Natsuno freed himself from Kaori's grasp and went towards the man. Both hands still gripped the shovel. Peering fixedly at the man's face, he eventually knelt at his side. Still looking even more closely at his face, he took one hand from the shovel to feel it.

Kaori came terrified to his side. Akira gripped at Kaori's hand.

"....Nii-chan."

Natsuno pulled off his work glove with his teeth. He touched the man's face with his bare hand then brought it to his nose. In the next instant he felt his neck. The sour scent rose up.

"Hey.... What's wrong? Did something happen?"

"Nii-chan, who is this person?"

"I don't know." Natsuno's voice was cracking.

"That person, is he okay?"

"....He's dead."

Kaori stiffened. She felt violently dizzy. It was like she had stepped into a nightmare. "No..."

"He's not breathing."

Akira let go of Kaori's hand and rushed to Natsuno's side. "Nii-chan, you killed him?!"

"....Might've," said Natsuno, putting his ear to the man's chest. "---No good. He's definitely dead."

"You've got to be kidding! Right!?" Kaori drew closer, then swallowed her breath. It was a face she didn't know. If nothing else she was certain it wasn't somebody she knew. The hair above his left ear was strangely jagged. It looked like it was stained with blood but already the colors were lost to the darkness.

The power was sapped from her legs. She realized what an affair it had become. Who was this? Why did they come to a place like this? To come flying out like that!

Collapsing to her ankles, she felt something cold touch her. Strangely limp, it was the man's hand. In an exceedingly normal shirt and pants, there was nothing that stood out about him at all.

"Nee-chan, what should we do?" Akira asked gripping her arm.

"How should I..." How should she know? Who was he? Were they caught digging up the grave? Was that why he came rushing out?

"It's not Nii-chan's fault. I mean... He came rushing out. You hit him to protecto Kaori. So."

That's right, thought Kaori. One shouldn't just jump out at somebody, they should call out first. The way he did it, Kaori thought someone scary was attacking her, so they couldn't blame Natsuno for hitting them to protect her.

--But, should they explain that to the adults? If they tried to, they would have to explain why the three were there, what they were

doing there.

"Self... It was self defense. It's not Nii-chan's fault!"

Natsuno stared at the man's face. Breathing out a sigh, he turned to face Kaori and the others.

"We've gotta do something about him."

"Something?"

Natsuno looked at the hanlf-dug hole. Kaori's spine went cold. He wasn't possibly going to say they should bury him like this, was he?

"No, we can't do something like..."

"He's cold," Natsuno said with a frightfully calm voice. "There's no body heat at all."

"He's dead. ...But, even so, we can't hide him."

"That's not what I mean. He's cold, already."

Eh? Kaori murmured. She remembered the temperature of the man's hand when she touched it.

"His body heat shouldn't have faded this fast. How many minutes has it been since he went down?"

Kaori stared seriously at the man, then reached out her hand and tried touching the man's. It really was cold. Edging closer she touched his face. Akira did the same and looked up at Natsuno.

"He never had any body heat to start with."

"That can't be..."

Kaori was fixated on the man.

"I think so. I'm sure he's dead but if nothing else, he definitely didn't just die a minute ago."

---That was.

He looked like a completely normal human. There was no difference between him and Akira or Natsuno. Besides not having any body heat.

"Ne..." Akira timidly voiced. "....If that's the case then, like, is he really dead?"

Kaori was startled. He had no body heat. He was already dead. --- Then right now, when he wasn't breathing, when he had no pulse, could he be called dead?

Natsuno looked back at Akira, then gripped the man's arm. Letting go of the shovel and gripping with both hands, he gestured to Akira to take his feet.

"Let's put him in that hole."

"Y... Yeah." Akira took the man's legs and made an unpleasant grimace. "Then what'll we do?"

"There's nothing to do is there? Anyway, we'll have to leave it at this for today." Saying that he took him to the edge of the hole and then rolled him in. "Let's cover him with dirt."

"What about the old Motohashi lady?"

"....I don't know," Natsuno said with a heavy sigh. "I can't think right now. Once I've calmed down tomorrow I'll think it over."

"Yeah, that's, that's right."

Akira gripped the shovel and began scooping dirt. Kaori followed suite.

"Just a little's fine. We'll be back tomorrow."

"But what if he's found like this?"

"As long as nobody knows we did it, does it matter? In fact, if he does get up, I'd be grateful if he was found by an adult."

That might be true, Kaori agreed in her mind. Whoever this man

was, he had to be somebody who was already dead. The adults would find a grave that was exposed and there would be somebody there who should have already been dead. Someone who should have already been buried and returned to the earth. If that happened, the village might know that something was happening, might be able to understand it.

Anyway for the time being just enough dirt to hide his body was piled on. It was the dead of night by then.

"---Let's go." Natsuno said, Kaori and Akira following.

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5

Walking along the lumber path, Seishin readjusted his grip on the shovel several times. Toshio walking alongside him also said nothing. While shining the light ahead in silence, they wordlessly went up the hill.

After some time had pased they came to something of a clearing. It was just where the west and northern mountains met, not too far from where Shimizu Megumi was found. That was the Yasumori family graveside. A relatively wide place, in it were planted four relatively new Sotoba standing tall. Three of them belonged to Yasumori Nao, Susumi and Mikiyasu, and the other was Yasumori Giichi's. This was originally the Yasumori head family's graveyard. The Yasumori Contractors were buried here as well.

Toshio's flashlight reflected off of the sotoba, stopping on one. In Seishin's own writing were the characters spelling out 'Yasumori Nao's common name and her date of death.

Nao's grave was rather uneven. There the weeds were already growing over and had died out. Next to that spot was an open, black hole. The men had come that afternoon to dig a hole in preparation for Setsuko.

Setsuko's vigil was performed by Seishin himself. He had done Nao's too. Seishin himself who had been a part of that burial ceremony was now going to dig it up.

"If we do this sloppy, then it'll cause a big fuss at tomorrow's burial," Toshio said, to which Seishin nodded. Toshio aside, he would have to be in this spot then. Just thinking of that made his stomach hurt.

"It's gonna be a hell of a lot of work but how about this?" Toshio said, taking out a small bundle of Chrysanthemum flowers from a nylon-taffeta travel sack.

"That's...?"

"I cut 'em from Mother's potted plants," Toshio laughed. "When we're read to go back, we'll tear the weeds from all the graves and put out some incense sticks. We should be able to fool them with that much right?"

I see, Seishin nodded. If they dug up and reburied a grave, they couldn't leave it with only Nao's grave looking in disarray. If they tended to the other graves similarly, the worst that'd be doubted was that somebody came visiting the graves. It was questionable as to whether it would fool anybody or not but it was better than nothing.

"Let's do it," Toshio declared. He the the flashlight in an appropriate place lighting their workspace. Spreading a vinyl sheet around Nao's grave, digging the scoop into the mound. He dumped what was dug up onto the sheet. It was important not to let any of it spill off of the sheet. He was careful of where he stepped so as not to step on the dirt from digging Setsuko's grave.

After digging so much, the Sotoba began to falter. Seishin took it down and properly carried it out of the way so that it wouldn't become dirtied. And then all the more silent he began to use the shovel. It was more laborious work than he'd imagined. They were violating a taboo, he had thought, fraying his nerves. Ever since climbing the mountain path, Seishin had constantly felt somebody's gaze on them. He couldn't help but feel that somebody was beside them, watching them; at times he heard somebody or could sense their presence but when he turned to look, there was no sign of anything. He knew it was his imagination.

It took some time before they hit the coffin. Moving the dirt from the top of the lid, it was exposed. Toshio and he exchanged looks before he put the shovel tip beneath the lid. It was put in place to wedge it open but no sooner was the shovel tip put in place than did the lid slip. Zuu, it sounded, Seishin trembling with fear as he

heard that sound.

"....It's open." Toshio's voice was dry and husky. It shouldn't have opened this easily. Not if it was nailed down. Seishin took the hand light in hand and looked again at the surface of the coffin. The points where the nails were driven in were torn open. Somebody had already opened the coffin.

Even Toshio simply held onto the shovel staring fixedly. Strangely, he had stopped. Probably, this coffin would be empty. Nao would quite possibly not be in this coffin. Even while thinking so, he was afraid to think that. Was it really all right to open it, wouldn't he regret opening it, a voice inside of him asked. ---If you open this, there's no way out.

Faintly, Toshio could be heard swallowing a breath. Toshio pushed the shovel tip beneath the lid. It lifted without resistance. And the emptiness within the coffin was exposed.

---A Shiki.

I knew it, he thought with a sense of vertigo. Nao wasn't in the coffin.
Suddenly, Seishin felt eyes on him. Somebody was watching through the firs that surrounded the graveyard, his intuition said. And it wasn't one or two people. In the darkness beneath the firs, countless somethings were gathered holding their breath, watching over Seishin and Toshio. He turned the hand light towards it. The darkness gave way to it but he couldn't sweep it away completely. The moment the darkness receeded, those lurking in the darkness did with it, he felt. He thought he'd heard a rustling sound of them moving but that was nothing more than the wind in the branches.
"What's wrong?"
Asked by Toshio, Seishin answered it was nothing. He knew, this was just another form taken by his guilt.
"It was Nao-san after all."
"Aa...."
Toshio nodded and returned the lid. Fitting it in place, he began using the shovel again. While taking care not to spill the dirt, he refilled the grave hole. Packing down the refilled dirt, when there

wasn't enough on the sheet to shovel it, the sheet was lifted and the dirt dumped onto the mound. The sotoba was set up again and the mount was smoothed level. Using the sheet, they were careful not to leave shovel marks. Shining the light over it several times, they made sure there were no signs of the grave being dug up, then went about to the others. Toshio durg at the dirt as if pulling the grass up as he asked if Seishin thought there were opened coffins beneath here too.
"....I wouldn't know."
"We don't have time to dig them up. But, sometime we might have to."
Preparing the mounds, flowers and incense were set out in offering. Checking that they weren't trailing dirt, they brushed away what they found by hand amongst the grass and weeds. All in all in took four hours.
Confirming that there wasn't anything forgotten, as they were about to leave Toshio peered into Setsuko's grave.
"Setsuko-san.... Think she'll rise up?"
"I wouldn't know."
It was Nao. They knew that. That she was a Shiki was sure too. -- But, even knowing that, what were they supposed to do? Setsuko was dead. Setsuko might have come back to live. Just how many had come back to life until now, just how many Shiki were moving in secret throughout the village?
Toshio parted at the halfway point of the mountain road with a promise to come again tomorrow night. Both saying again and again for the other to be careful, Seishin went on his way with his sluggish body trying to hide the aches and pains. While wandering the mountain pathway, he suddenly looked up.
Seishin had ended up on the northern mountain. His feet wandered as if being lead off of the road, climbing to where there was no longer a mountain road. Soon enough he came to where a small road he knew was. Following it back along he came to one dilapidated building.
Seishin gazed up at that deep black form. It looked to be a church, but it was not a church. When Sunako had at first nervously approached it, she was surprised saying "It's not a church." If this were really a church, Sunako might not have been able to enter. Sunako's response at that time might have been because she entered someplace she should not have been able to enter.

She could understand feeling as if one had been abandoned by God, Sunako said. That's right, Sunako was a dead body who should not have risen, and the moment she had turned on that divine providence, she became a living being abandoned by God. She hunted people in need of their sacrifice. Contrary to God's order, she was a being caught up in that order she went against.
"But... That isn't your fault," Seishin murmured.
If Sunako was a Shiki, somebody had attacked Sunako. And then Sunako died. She rose up. Nobody could blame the risen Sunako for attacking Nao. There was no doubt that Sunako and Nao were victims.
Was she attacked by Seishirou or was it Chizuru? In either case, the darkness came over her, she was seized within that darkness. Sunako could no longer come out of that darkness, and she had to live within the order of the dark. Now and forever after, she was a prisoner of a world where God's splendor did not reach.
---Death is terrible for anyone.
"That's it exactly.... It really is."

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6

The dead of night painted its color over the mountains. As it was obvious there would be no signs of people, from time to time the sounds of small animals in the underbrush would lead to it rustling dryly.

The grave at End Mountain was also painted in the color of darkness. Dirt covering a dead body was upturned. At last the man rose up. For a bit he sat as if dazed there in the hole looking into the darkness. The birds sand, the noises resounding through the woods.

The man eventually began to get himself up. He felt above his left ear. There the dried blood and dirt make his hair edgy. The man took a bit of time to stroke his hair, then gingerly rose up. He looked around as if to get a feel for his situation before climbing out of the hoe.

Hazily the man stepped out of the graveyard. Gradually as his legs moved, he went along the forest path along the slope of the western mountain straight towards the northern one.

The man was able to walk well, without knowing fatigue. Even if he broke into a jog, he wouldn't break into hard breathing. Or rather, the man wasn't breathing at all to begin with. Nor did fatigue wear down at his legs. Within the deep dark forests he ascended, the bushes didn't tie up his feet, he went through them as if soaring past them.

Without so much as a single break, the man went on until he reached a small shack about midway along the western mountain. It was an abandoned shack that seemed to be built in an old fashioned style but the holes in the tin roof were patched over, and the holes

in the walls were filled with plaster.

The man opened the door, and within that was another heavy set of double doors. Within there wasn't so much as a single lit candle but the man could see that there were the several figures within.

"....Takatoshi?" One of the people within said. Hirosawa Takatoshi nervously entered in.

"I saw some strange kids,' Takatoshi said. "Digging up a grave on End Mountain."

The other person made a low, surprised sound.

"They were digging up the grave stone. Three kids. One seemed to be a boy about high school age, a boy in middle or gradeschool, and a girl about the same age. The one in highschool is the son of the workshop I think. I've seen him before."

"....And?" the voice of the other young man urged.

"When I tried to attack, I got countered. I was hit by a scoop. I was unconscious until now."

"...A high schooler?"

"That's right."

I see, the man said followed by a short silence. "I'm not happy to hear we were noticed here. It may be necessary to take measures to see to it word doesn't get around."

"With all three of them?"

"We should wait on the middle school boy and girl. It would be bad to have any interference here."

"Are we going to leave them be?"

"They will need to be scolded, to be sure they don't say anything unnecessary. Just because it would be best to clear out anything in the way. Do you know who they were and from where?"

"No."

"Finding out that will be our first priority, then. If we watch over the boy from the workshop, they'll probably show up around him but..." That said, the man lightly cut himself short. "A gradeschool or middleschool boy, and a girl about middle school aged you had said, yes? Was that girl, by chance, long haired with her hair in braids?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I see..." He laughed. "It was those kids, was it?"

"Is it somebody you know of, Tatsumi-san?"

Aa, Tatsumi laughed. "They're the siblings in Shimo-Sotoba. They were loitering around the mansions. Aa, and the one who came along after was the son of the workshop, was it?"

"What will we do?"

"Let's kill the son of the workshop." Tatsumi said lowly, looking at the air as if scrutinizing it, and at last finally nodding. "It'd be best to kill him, wouldn't it? He's already in high school. He commutes out of town for school, so I don't think those at the mansion will be against it. I'll take command of the operation. You don't need to worry, Takatoshi."

"The grave was dug up."

"Well that is bad, isn't it? Go ahead and bury it back as it was."

Yes, Takatoshi nodded. As Takatoshi turned to go, Tatsumi called out to him as if remembering something. "Aa---and also."

As he turned about, he saw Tatsumi giving a compassionate smile. "It didn't work out for your mother."

Takatoshi faintly closed his eyes, then lowered them. "....Is that so."

"It smells of rotting. She won't rise up. ....It's a shame, isn't it?"

"No matter," Takatoshi murmured.

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Cultural Notes

4-3
Ofuda

- A piece of paper, cloth or plank of wood or metal with the name or symbol of a god and/or temple or shrine written on it. Said to be imbibed with a portion of a god or spirit (which can be divided indefinitely), they can be made with specialized blessings in mind, such as for luck in studying, safety in traveling, fertility, healthy childbirth, etc. They're meant to be put in the family shrine or altar but can also be placed elsewhere; for example, it's common to have one in the kitchen to prevent house fires or also at doorways or on windows to keep evil from entering. It's customary to bring ofuda in to a temple to replace every year, to dispose of the old charm loaded with bad luck in a ritualistic and grateful manner rather than treating it like common trash. In a more cynical view, purchases of them are seen as a donation to the temple or shrine.

4 - 5

Chrysanthemums - Chrysanthemums are a popular flower in Japanese symbolism. In particular, white ones are commonly used

to decorate grave sites. They symbolize rejuvenation and happiness in the Japanese language of flowers.

4 - 6

I translated Takatoshi as saying "No matter" in response to Tatsumi's saying "It's a shame, isn't it?" because the direct translation of his response (iie or "no") might carry some connotations it's not quite supposed to. Iie is used as no, but it's also used dismissively as if to say not to worry about it. To agree that it is a shame would be inviting further sympathy which wouldn't be inappropriate, but is not Takatoshi's intent for the scene.

While I think that reading into it to say he doesn't necessarily think it's a good thing to rise is a valid reading, if it were translated as just "no" that reading would become very heavy handed and unavoidable one in English, where it is not necessarily so in Japanese.

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1

As Seishin changed clothes and headed out from the back room towards the temple office, he saw Miwaki making a perplexed face and turned around.

"Aa---Seishin, Sumi-kun hasn't called?"

No, Seishin anwered. Last night, after doing the business of which he could not speak, he returned to the temple and didn't do much beyond take a shower before taking a nap in the temple office. After the morning services ended he had gone back to the back room to take another nap, so he didn't have any opportunity to cross paths with Sumi..

"I wonder what's happened?" Tsurumi who was already there that morning tilted his head. Yasumori Setsuko's funeral was coming up.

"He isn't here yet?"

"That's right."

Even though Tsurumi and Sumi commuted, since Sumi hadn't shown up, he had to break from their usual plans to come ahead.

"When I'd tried phoning Sumi-kun's place, his mother said that he had left the house some time ago, but."

"I hope there wasn't an accident," Mitsuo interposed. "So, what'll we do? If someone doesn't go now, we'll be late for the appointment with the contractors." Mitsuo said while looking at Ikebe but Ikebe looked in bewilderment at the schedule board. While Seishin and Tsurumi were out, Ikebe would have to hold the memorial services. "Should we call them and see if we can have them change the plans

for the memorial service? We could ask."

So Mitsuo said but Seishin shook his head. "We couldn't possibly do that. And this late into things, we can't ask any neighboring temples to assist either. I will speak with Tokujiro-san and convey my apologies. I will ask him to somehow make do with myself and Tsurumi-san given the current state of the village."

Mitsuo and Ikebe could only nod. Mitsuo saw Seishin and Tsurumi off, then he saw Ikebe off, then once again he called Sumi's house. Once again Sumi's mother picked up, and promised that if Sumi who had gone out did come back she would contact them right away.

When Sumi did call, evening was dawning. At about the same time Seishin was tending to Setsuko's grave searching the graveyard for traces of the deed they'd commited, but for the time being there were no traces and nobody had said that anything seemed out of place and so he had relaxed.

The one who answered the phone was Mitsuo as usual. "It's you---Sumi-kun."

Mitsuo's voice held an unintended accusatory tone. Sumi replied with a dispirited apology.

"What am I going to do with your apology? Think of other people why don't you. The Junior Monk had to bow his head and say some difficult things because of you."

Yes, Sumi said with his voice dejected and small.

"And so? What is it that happened? Was there an accident or something?"

"That isn't quite the..." Sumi grit his teeth and hesitated before saying. "I'm sorry but, I, I won't be able to come in for a while."

"Wait, Sumi-kun?"

"I'm sorry. Give my regards to the Junior Monk and the Madame."

Mitsuo sighed. "Sumi-kun. I know it'll be hard to look the Junior Monk and the others in the eye. I might've been a little too rough on you too. But, don't you think reacting like that's a little too childish?"

"....That isn't it," Sumi said his words further poorly enunciated. "It isn't because I feel bad..."

Mitsuo tilted his head and waited to hear what Sumi had to say. Sumi's noninflected voice had sounded like he was saying something pre-scripted.

"It is too busy. I am tired from having to hurry about so much. Sotoba is strange. So I do not want to. I do not wish to return. I hate going into Sotoba itself."

Mitsuo was at a loss for words. "Sumi-kun?"

"I am sorry. That is how it is. Please do not call for me anymore."

Without waiting for Mitsuo's response, Sumi hung up the phone. Dazedly holding onto the receiver Mitsuo gave Ikebe a puzzled look as he returned.

".....What happened?"

"Aa.... No. Welcome back," Mitsuo said hanging up the receiever. He wondered if he should try calling back. Ikebe watched Mitsuo as he wondered such. Before he could voice anything, Tsurumi could be heard returning. He must have separated from Seishin who stood in at the burial and returned before him.

"What is it?" Tsurumi said as he returned, sensing the atmosphere of the room and making a sullen face. "Another one?"

"No," Mitsuo answered. "It's.... Sumi-kun, it seems he's quitting."

Ikebe and Tsurumi let out wordless gasps.

"Quitting, at a time like this?!" Tsurumi's voice was tinged with anger.

"He says he hates Sotoba. It's too busy, it's strange, he said. He said he won't be coming for a while but he probably won't come back at all with that, huh?"

"That, he just..." Tsurumi all but roared out but Ikebe only gave a weak murmur.

"I see.... Sumi-san, he's been scared away, hasn't he?"

"Oi, Ikebe-kun."

Ikebe sat in a chair looking at the schedule. Having had three memorial services since that morning, this was the first time Ikebe was actually free.

"A little before, I was talking with Sumi-kun. About how these numbers aren't normal. The Junior Monk said nothing's for certain it seems but without a doubt there's an epidemic. But none the less of all the houses we've gone to none have said there's been an epidemic disease. What the Junior Monk was saying was not that he didn't know if it was spreading or not but that they don't know what kind of spreading disease it is, wasn't it? It's already certain that it's spreading, and it's in full force about it. Even now it's growing stronger. But we don't know the name of the disease.

They call it an emergent virus, don't they? There are sicknesses like those these days, aren't there?"

Mitsuo and Tsurumi fell into silence.

"To be honest, I'm scared too. I get the feeling, like, something terrible's happening. But, with this many dying, somebody has to mourn for them. So, it's not like we can run away huh, we'd been saying but..."

Right, was all Mitsuo said. It might not have been for nothing that they were afraid. Mitsuo himself was born and raised in the village. This temple was where he belonged, and from the beginning he'd had a feeling he would live and die in this village. Even if he tried to run he had nowhere to run to, but that wasn't so for Sumi and Ikebe. Sumi needed only not come to the village, and

Ikebe had a home he could return to.

Tsurumi let out a heavy sigh, perhaps thinking the same thing.

"It's because I'm not a villager. Since I don't have anywhere to go, the idea of running away never even occured to me. ...That's right, it might be different for you guys, huh?"

"I don't plan on doing that, though."

That right, Tsurumi laughed. Mitsuo let out a sigh.

".....Just why did it have to come to this anyway. Nothing like this's ever happened before."

"It might be the people of Kanemasa."

The one to say it was Tsurumi. Mitsuo looked to Tsurumi in surprise. Tsurumi raised a brow as if wholly surprised by that surprise.

"It's been since that house moved in hasn't it? And they seem to be so well off, couldn't they have traveled overseas someplace, then brought something back with them, I wonder?"

"Hasn't it been since before they moved?" Ikebe said tilting his head uneasily. "Yes, it was from before. When the incident happened in Yamairi, they hadn't moved in yet. It was the night of the vigil for those in Yamairi wasn't it? That they moved in."

"It was, wasn't it?" Mituso frowned. "Don't just say that kind of thing carelessly. I'm begging you, don't breathe a word of that king of rumor to the parishioners. ....Well, since the Kanemasa family doesn't seem exceptionally interested in mingling with anyone from the village, they probably won't hurt or even register to them, but."

Ikebe gave a laudible nod but Tsurumi made an even deeper scowl.

"....I see. That's how it was."

"Haa?"

"No, lately, the people from the village have been, well," Tsurumi said, his voice low. "It's been like there's a distance. No, not all of them, I'm not talking about the parishioners. But whenever I go out shopping or some such, there are people who seem to shrink away. Like they're trying to put a distance between us. Even if I ask for a delivery, they're reluctant about it."

Come to think of it, Mitsuo thought, his thoughts turning. When it came to having offerings or such brought to the temple, there were some bringing them by who were hesitant, if he thought about it.

"In other words, that's what it's been."

"I mean, it's a spreading disease. Nobody's saying it but they suspect it. Or maybe they just think that it's a bad omen, but we go right into the places where the dead are. We're in direct contact with the dead all the time. So, they probably don't want to mingle with us much."

Mitsuo let out a heavy breath. That's what it was then, he thought. When they put it like that, that was indeed how it'd been. When did people start avoiding the temple?

"It's not for nothing that Sumi-kun came to hate it, huh...." Mitsuo shook his head. "But, how are we supposed to tell this to the Junior Monk and the Madame?"

Tsurumi and Ikebe gave vague noises of agreement. Mitsuo rose feeling heavy. At any rate, they had to report it somehow or another to Seishin and Miwako.

Feeling nervous, he headed towards the kitchen. Miwako and Katsue were cleaning up the kitchen. Now that he thought about it, lately fewer parishioners were coming to the temple to help too. With no end to it in sight, it might have just been that they didn't have the time for it but there might have also been another reason to avoid the temple.

Mitsuo called out to Miwako, and awkwardly conveyed Sumi's resignation. Miwako had a hurt expression.

"That's.... Sadly, it seems that there are also those in the village who believe that it might be an epidemic. I don't want to think so, but."

Miwako's expression stiffened. "Mitsuo-san, that's."

"I think that it's just a simple rumor though. Well, that's the reason for Sumi-kun too but...."

"Mitsuo-san." Miwako took Mitsuo's hand, moving to sit at the entryway to the side room off of the kitchen. "....I wonder if Seishin is all right?"

"Madame?"

"It may be a plague, mightn't it? It surely is. No matter how I think on it, there have been too many to die. And furthermore Seishin has been meeting with Toshio-kun in secret and doing something, it seems. I wonder if it isn't because of that?"

"Yes.... That might be the case."

"I wonder if he's all right. Even without that, I don't know when that child is sleeping. He's running about from morning to night."

That's right, Mitsuo answered. If it was a plague, the village was in trouble. It was no time to be worried about Seishin individually but he understood Miwako's saying such a thing. To Miwako he was her one and only child. And furthermore a child that had come after some time. Until Seishin had been born, Miwako had been suffering under the pressure of the parishioners pushing her to hurry and have a successor. She had at last managed to have one son, it was a happy occasion, and her reputation had risen amongst the villagers but if she were to lose that son, just thinking about it would only naturally make her uneasy.

Mitsuo too felt a slightly different but similar uneasiness. He was the only successor. Seishin could not yet fulfill all of the duties of the head monk. In practical matters, Seishin was the head monk but

Seishin had yet no wife nor child. Far from it, they hadn't had the ceremony for his transfer to the position, so he had yet to truly inherit the temple. The temple was central to the village. To the parish, the temple's continuation was a priority matter over all else. If something were to happen to Seishin. With Shinmei in his condition, if they weren't careful, then they would have no choice but to have a head installed through the kind offices of the head temple, one who they had never seen nor known.

"It isn't like that." The one to speak was Katsue, who had been silently cleaning the sink. "Madame, you needn't worry. A plague or some sort isn't what's happening."

"Mom, just saying that is...."

"I'm not jut saying it," Katsue said, ceasing to scrub as she turned to face Mitsu and Miwako. "Don't you understand? I understand full well. This isn't a plague at all. So the Junior Monk is fine. No worries."

"But... Katsue-san."

Katsue nodded as if giving her stamp of approval. "This is something the temple will get through. It won't be able to lay a hand on the Junior Monk or the Head Monk. Moreover, Mitsuo, you should be the one on guard."

"On guard?"

"Don't worry about your body. I'm telling you to have proper faith and live rightly."

"Mom."

Mitsuo intended to argue her explanation but Katsue shook her head. "If I say what I'm thinking, you'll just think me a fool. But I know it. I do, you know."

Leaving it at that, she silently cleaned up. Miwako looked uneasily to Mitsuo but Mitsuo only tilted his head.

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2

Natsuno got off of the bus and went straight onto the village road. He could see Kaori and Akira at the corner of the public hall's grounds.

"Nii-chan!"

The one calling right out to him was Akira. Natsuno nodded. There were no signs of people on the grounds as evening fell. It was the same over by where the bench and jungle gym were. Natsuno threw down his bag onto the bench. Akira came over and took a seat beside it.

"Naa, what'll we do, did you think of anything?"

"No," Natsuno answered shortly. "But it's fine."

"Fine? What?"

"I tried going this morning," Natsuno said. Akira looked to Kaori. Natsuno nodded at nobody in particular.

He was entirely unable to calm down. More than anything, the sensation in his hands when the tip of his shovel had hit the unidentified man was a sensation he couldn't forget.

If he thought about it calmly, the situation was clear enough he had thought. If somebody had caught sight in passing of Natsuno and the others disturbing the grave, they'd ask who they were before attacking them. Even if the might have mistaken Natsuno for a full-bodied adult, one of them was a little girl and the other was a child. It was only natural someone would call out to them first, and even if they hurried to them that was different from lunging at them.

But there was no denying that the man did come lunging at Kaori. No matter how one thought about it, he was attacking Kaori, and he felt that what he did there in eliminating that man was correct. There was no room for doubt that the man had already been long cold. In the first place, no matter how bad of a spot he had hit him in, he couldn't think that the man had died that quickly with one blow. The man was dead from before.

---But, the sensation in his hands defied that kind of reasoning. Natsuno clearly raised the considerably, weighty weapon over head with the intent to convey harm and as a result the man fell over. The man who fell over ceased to move. He didn't raise and indicate that he was all right to them.

Thinking of that, he couldn't stop his terrified shivers. He did something he couldn't take back. He'd strayed, done an act one must absolutely never do, he had thought. What scared him was that "sin" in itself. That he couldn't run from his awareness of his own sin. he couldn't run from the belief that a punishment would be dealt in relation to that sin. Right and wrong was something deeply engrained into Natsuno's personality, a psychological underpinning he had been tinged with. It transcended reason. No matter how he might try to rephrase it, he couldn't escape from the sense that that was an unforgivable deed.

Unable to sleep, unable to even rest, late into the night he went to that graveyard, thinking to confirm once more time that the man was dead. What held him back was that what Natsuno wanted to have confirmed was not that "the man is dead" but that "the man is alive." If he could confirm that the man wasn't dead, Natsuno could escape his consciousness and that sin. Unable to cast off the expectation of such a discovery, wanting to prove it to himself at any cost, he couldn't stop himself from rushing out and up the hill to that grave spot. But in doing that he might have confirmed that it was the case that the man was dead. That scared him. That was why he was just barely able to reign it in, the urge to head out.

But that was only until dawn, and as soon as the sun's rays shone he could no longer hold it in. Hurrying out of the house, he rode his bicycle towards the village road towards the Motohashi family gravesite. ---He couldn't not do it.

"……Nii-chan?" Akira pushed. Natsuno sighed.

"He wasn't there."

Eh, Akira and Kaori let out.

"Then.... That guy wasn't dead, after all."

Natsuno shook his head. "I don't know. The grave was put back."

"That's--what do you mean?"

"Like I said, the grave was back like it was. The mound was made and the sotoba was stood up again. There was no sign of him. I don't know if he was buried with her or if he started moving again after that and left."

"But who'd do that?"

"Who knows? But it's obvious they did it at night. It couldn't have been the Motohashi lady's family. I can't really see them as going grave visiting in the middle of the night. Much less on the night of the burial."

Akira nodded. "It was them?"

"I don't know that either. Anyway, I tried stabbing down with a pole and it didn't seem like there was a dead body right under the mound. I can't be completely sure, but."

"Then, the old Motohashi lady might've Risen?"

"Might've. Anyway, I left it so that if the mound was broken I'd know. I left some pebbles and markers around there. If the old lady rises up and rebuilds the mound, even if it's reburied again, I'll know by looking."

Akira nodded meekly, and then peered at Natsuno's face. "Naa, what'll we do from now on? Should we dig up the Motohashi's Baa-chan's grave one more time?"

Motohashi Tsuruko's dead body was untouched. If they wanted to

stop the dam from breaking so to speak they couldn't just leave her like that. That's what Akira was thinking but Natsuno shook his head with a strange disinterest.

"Hey... Akira, yesterday, were you scared?"

"Not really."

So Akira said but of course this was a lie. He was too scared to sleep. Kaori made some noise, came in saying she would sleep in his room. If she hadn't, Akira himself might have been the one running into Kaori's room.

"Aren't you brave," Natsuno said with a smile that saw through Akira's false courage. "....I was scared."

"No way."

"I was. Going to the grave again, confirming her dead body's there, stabbing a stake in to make sure she doesn't rise. ---I don't know if I can do that."

"But, ... we'll do it, right?"

"We've gotta." Natsuno's voice cracked low.

Yuuki turned his head towards the voice at the entryway that called out "Excuse me."

It was already dark outside the windows. Azusa was making preparations for dinner in the kitchen. So Yuuki himself rose to answer it.

When he opened the entryway door, a girl who looked to be in gradeschool stood there. Something about her gave him the impression of being hardened. That may have been because of her dark expression that didn't suit a child.

"Yes?"

"This is the Yuuki-san residence?"

"Yes it is. And you are?"

"Shizuka," was all the girl said. "Is Onii-chan here?"

Yuuki tilted his head. "Onii-chan---You mean Natsuno?"

The little girl nodded.

"Natsuno hasn't come home from school yet. Did you need him for something?"

The little girl again nodded. "It is something very important, so may I wait?"

The girl spoke looking up as if taking a peek at Yuuki. To put it honestly, what Yuuki felt was a faint revulsion. Maybe it was because the little girl's words were said in a monotone voice as if scripted, because of the feeling of something rotting away coiling about her. There was the feeling that she wasn't a child particularly looking to be friendly with his son.

"What did you need from him?" Yuuki asked but the girl shook her head. "Is it something that's that important right now? It's already dinner time. How about trying tomorrow?"

"No," the little girl said shortly. "I have important business so I'll wait."

Yuuki was bewildered. "But I don't know what time Natsuno will be back. Where are you from? Naka-Sotoba?"

"Monzen."

"What's your last name?"

"Matsuo. Matsuo Shizuka."

"Matsuo, is it---- Where from in Monzen?"

"At the border of Kami-Sotoba. SakaiMatsu."

Yuuki didn't know if it was a regional name or a shop name.

Having the feeling he should have known who the little girl was with that, Yuuki wouldn't know it even if he were told, for example, who lived next door or any such. "That's pretty far, isn't it? It's already dark out, it might be better to go back home for tonight, don't you think? I'll tell him that you came, though."

"I'll wait."

"Really, I don't know when he'll be back. Sometimes he stops on the way and he doesn't come home until pretty late and all."

"It's very important so I'll wait," the little girl repeated with a glare meant to put him in place. Yuuki sighed.

"I see..."

Yuuki looked around. Nowhere along the dark streets did he see any sign of his son. The little girl stared fixedly at him. There was something expressed there in her upturned eyes. Yuuki felt some unexpressed disatisfaction therein, something irritating.

"Are you a friend of Natsuno's?"

The girl nodded. She repeated "I have important business" in a childish tone that grated on his nerves.

I get it, Yuuki said finally worn to the end of his patience as he opened the door. "Then for now you can wait inside."

Without a word of thanks to him the little girl slid into the entryway. She went right past Yuuki and into the house itself.

"Wait, you."

The little girl turned around. Even seeing her in the light, there was nothing special about her, there were countless girls just like her in the village.

"I'm waiting for Onii-chan. Can't I go to his room?"

At once Yuuki felt unease. He knew that all that was happening was that a child would be waiting in Natsuno's room but there was

something he found too overbearing about it. That wasn't all. It was also making him uneasy not to know the reason. Yuuki didn't like this girl. If Natsuno were to be close with her, he realized that it would be questionable as to why. The little girl was strange, in some way that deviated from Yuuki's common sense, something sinister he couldn't put into words.

"I can, right? Which one?" The girl spoke as if irritated, as if about to stomp her feet. No, now that's enough, Yuuki wanted to say, but he endured.

Something about the little girl was tainted. It was as if she were psychologically damaged in some way. The untarnished truth was that she was disgusting. --But that was all the more reason Yuuki couldn't refuse her. He himself did not want to embrace any discomfort or disgust just by what this little girl looked like.

"It's down the hall, the one furthest at the left."

The little girl turned her back as if on a pivot. Heading directly down the hall, she stopped and turned at the corner as if remembering something. "Onii-chan is coming here after me. May he?"

Yuuki vaguely nodded. "Sure. By all means."

The little girl nodded.

With a 'ku' sound at last she laughed. That smile was dark, and indeed Yuuki didn't like it. Closing the entryway, he casually headed down the hallway. Once he turned the corner, he saw Natsuno's door was closed.

"What was with that girl?" came a voice behind him. It was Azusa."....She's an eerie one, isn't she?"

"Don't say things like that," Yuuki said but the voice inside of himself was only saying the same.

When Azua at least thought to bring her some tea, the room was dark and the child was sitting alone, sullenly.

Azusa kept her unease in check and turned on the lights. With a deliberately cheerful voice she asked if she wasn't afraid of the dark, if she'd like some tea, to stay for dinner, but the child just sat in silence. She showed a sharp smile but she gave no particular response and showed no signs of wanting to converse with Azusa. There were several things she'd wanted to ask but feeling perplexed, Azusa left.

"What could be the matter with that child..." she said to Yuuki, but Yuuki only gave a half-hearted response.

"There are kids like that, even in this village. It's like, she leaves a very uncharacteristic impression, for a place like this."

"---How so?"

"I mean, I thought it was a place with scenic charms, tranquil, but I realized it's really not. Sotoba comes from the word sotoba doesn't it, if I remember. It really does feel like that too."

Azusa had tried to say but Yuuki offered no response. They were expecting something different when they'd moved. But when they'd tried moving in, after one year of not being able to really become a part of the village society, upon finally trying to take part, they were just being rounded up to take part in unfortunate ceremonies. Azusa at last understood how incorrigible the village society was.

As she let out a sigh, there was the sound of the entryway opening. Peering down the hall, she saw that Natsuno had finally come home.

"Welcome back. Natsuno-kun has a visitor."

"---A visitor? Tamocchan?"

Azusa shook her head and came to see him. She kept her voice low. "A little girl. Who is she?"

"A girl? No idea."

"She's someone who knows you isn't she? She said she was some girl from Monzen. Something like Matsuo Shizuka she said."

Natsuno gave a dubious expression. "Who's that?"

"Who---well. She came to visit you! She said she had business with you so she'd wait," Azusa said, turning to face Yuuki who was coming as well. "Didn't she?"

Yuuki nodded. "It might not have been her but her brother who had business with you though."

"Matsuo--I don't remember anyone like that."

"I tried to suggest she wait until tomorrow but she kept saying it was important and wouldn't listen. She asked if 'Onii-san' could come too but it seems like he hasn't come yet."

Natsuno tilted his head. "Where?"

"In your room."

Natsuno looked at Yuuki as if displeased. "Don't just let people in my room."

"That girl was the one who said she'd wait in your room. She asked if she could, I can't very well just turn her down cold can I?" Yuuki said, Natsuno's eyes suddenly opening wide. In an instant, Yuuki could feel a sense of terror in Natsuno.

"What is that girl?"

"Like I said, I don't know," Natsuno said hurrying down the hall. He all but threw open the door. And then he stayed standing there in the hall.

"---natsuno?"

"You said there was a little girl? ---So, what kind of girl?"

Yuuki tilted his head. "What kind?" he started to say when he came to stand before his room, peering inside. His mouth dropped.

There was nobody inside of the room. The window was open, the wind blowing through. The tea that Azusa had brought was on the

floor, cooling and looking untouched.

"That's..."

Natsuno peered out the window.

"She said she was Matsuo Shizuka from Monzen. She had something important she she wanted to wait---in your room, she said?"

"What kind of girl?"

"Even if you ask what kind of girl... She was kind of a creepy child you could say, but."

I see, Natsuno said, his voice low.

".... She said her brother was coming?"

"She did say that. Was it all right if her brother comes too, she said."

Natsuno turned his now oddly pale face towards Natsuno. "How'd you answer?"

"Well," Yuuki said haltingly. He didn't know why, but he had the feeling he had terribly mismanaged something. "I couldn't exactly refuse, so I said that it was all right."

I see, his son said, voice all the more low.

"Akira, telephone."

Akira set his chopsticks down as his mother called for him. He went into the hallway and picked up the phone. "Got it!"

"---This Akira?" It was Natsuno's voice. "When you got home did any visitors come?"

"No? Not really."

I see, Natsuno murmured. "You listening? Ask your mom and dad. If someone comes to visit you or your sister, tell them definitely not

to let them in the house."

".....What's this about?"

"Just do it. Think of a good reason. Even if they say it's important, even if they say they want to wait at the house, tell them to send them away for you. Absolutely do not let them into the house. Got it?"

"Y... Yeah." Akira nodded for the time being. Natsuno once again stressed the idea and then hung up. Akira stared at the receiver for a time, thinking on what Natsuno could be getting at, suddenly make such a phone call.

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3

"How was it, any talk about grave wrecking come up?" Toshio asked Seishin as he entered the room, earning an inappropriate laugh.

"It didn't. But there was talk of some compassionate soul who went tending to graves in the middle of the night."

"I see," Toshio said with a laugh, lowering his eyes to his book. After a moment of laughter, he continued. "....So, what'll we do?"

Seishin hung his head, at a loss for what to say.

It was Shiki. There was no proof but he could say there was no doubt about it. But, ---that said, what were they to do about it? People wouldn't exactly believe them if they went around to others saying be careful, there are Shiki. Even now attacks were taking place. Even though the victims were increasing, Seishin and the others had no way of stopping it.

"Seems pretty much confirmed that magic's affective. Also it looks like they probably can't get in without an invitation. Don't invite anyone strange in to keep the Shiki at bay. If possible keep a talisman or a ceremonial arrow or something on you for protection. ---If we put that out there, you think anyone'll listen?"

Seishin wordlessly shook his head. Seishin sighed.

"By now, there's no faith left in me after all. The best I'd get out of it is that they'd say that Ozaki quack's playing a prank on us. At least compared to me you've got a little more esteem but..."

Toshio didn't say anything more but Seishin nodded. They lacked

faith in Seishin in another way. he had his side job as an unknown author. Without anybody knowing much about it, somehow he'd cultivated a certain eccentric image. On top of that was a prior offense Seishin couldn't deny. The reason that the parishioners weren't pushing him to marry and hurry to bear a successor was because they couldn't escape the feeling that they would be touching on a sore spot that needed to be handled with utmost care, Seishin was well aware of that. If he tried to start saying there were Shiki here, it would just come down to them thinking it'd finally come to that end with him too.

They didn't have Ishida. Kanemasa's son, his replacement, didn't have the predecessor's prestige. Even if he did, be it Kanemasa or be it Ishida, trying to convince anyone of it would cost them dearly, and even if they did have them on hand, convincing them would be incredibly difficult, with convincing the villagers themselves bound to be near impossible. If they at least had others with like-minded suspicions, Seishin thought. If they just had a count of such people, if they could get their hands on them, then they could breathe suspicions to the other villagers at least. But if it were just Seishin and Toshio decrying it loudly, it'd be seen as entirely too absurd, with nobody taking it realistically.

"We don't have any way to go at this, huh...."

"Yeah."

"We can't do nothing. How about it, feel like wrecking another grave?"

"Setsuko-san's?"

"We do have to check if Setsuko-san's Risen up or not but for now it might be better to follow the trend starting with the first people to die. The three from Yamairi were cremated, so the first dead body'd be Gotouda's Shuuji-san, huh?"

Seishin cast his eyes down. In spite of it all he was still opposed to grave digging. But at any rate it was true that the only thing that they could do for the time being was dig up and confirm the dead

bodies.

"For better or for worse, the only Gotoudas hit were the main family. by the time the Gotouda's Jii-san died his ties were pretty scant, so there's probably nobody who goes by his grave. We don't have to be as careful as we were when it was Nao-san's. It should be easier work, so how about it?"

Seishin thought about it then nodded. He couldn't do anything but nod.

Toshio was already prepared. Flashlight in hand, in the falling dusk Seishin and Toshio headed to the Gotouda gravesite. It didn't seem like anyone had tended to the grave since the burial so the grave was covered with autumn growth and colored with age.

This time without taking such precise care in the matter they used the shovel to dig up the coffin. Even so, digging up the coffin deeply buried in the earth was annoyingly hard work.

As they came upon the coffin, seeing the lid half off they were prepared for Shuuji's coffin to be empty. Just like with Nao's, one part of the lid was broken open. They broke in the rest of the lid to peer inside. As expected Shuuji was not within.

As Seishin made to rebury it, Toshio went to work at Fuki's grave. Seishin was just reshaping the dirt into a mound like shape when Toshio came upon Fuki's coffin.

"……Oi."

Toshio shined the flash light over the coffin lid. It was nailed tightly shut, with no sign of a broken lid. As expected even Toshio was visibly taken aback.

"……What will we do?"

"There's no what about it," Toshio said wiping the sweat from his dirt-covered face as his brows furrowed. "We can't just leave it unchecked like this, right?"

Seishin nodded. Toshio awoke from any misgivings he may have

been under and roughly jammed the shovel beneath the lid. The lid made a sound as it broke, and at the same time a rotting smell wafted up. Toshio masked his face with the stained towel. With the shovel tip still wedged beneath the lid, he pushed down on the handle with his knee to force the lid up. Seishin likewise took off his sweatshirt to cover his face, shining the flashlight into the gap.

Toshio immediately released the shovel and let the lid drop back down. Seishin too averted his eyes, and after all of this turned towards the grave with his hands folded in prayer. Toshio didn't say a word, and so neither did Seishin. The two reburied the grave in silence.

It wouldn't do to just throw the dirt over this one and not make it up as they did Shuuji's but since they'd started digging these up they'd become more familiar with it, so reburying it didn't take as much time this time. They reshaped the mound, set the sotoba in place again, once again folded their hands and left the graveyard. Their knees and hands trembled with cramps of exhaustion.

"....This means not all the dead people revive, then." Toshio breathed hard enough his shoulders moved with it, heading down onto the lumber road, towards the village road where he sat down. He threw himself down in the thicket. "No matter what the actual rate is, it's not a hundred percent. That's helpful."

Likewise sitting there in the village at night, Seishin nodded.

"But that doesn't change the problem. What're we supposed to do now?"

Seishin kept quiet. If not all of the dead revived, then what they needed to hurry on with first was getting a grasp on the numbers of the Shiki. How many Shiki was the village housing, and from there how many victims would a Shiki take?

In terms of getting a count of how many Shiki there were, practically speaking they could visit the graves and just count the empty coffins. ---No, he thought. Even then they wouldn't know the true count. There were those who had moved out. Those who had clearly had an outbreak before they'd left the village. It was possible

that that was more or less all of them. Attacked by Shiki, with no regard for their own will, they left, leaving behind only the words 'we're moving.' The ones who handled the luggage were Takasago Movers. A moving company that only came at night. They couldn't have been moving to anywhere above ground at this rate. They'd probably never find them. Surely the same went for Ishida.

Doing Shuuji and Fuki's graves wasn't so hard without the aftermath to consider and it went fairly simply but doing Nao's had taken four hours. Speaking of practical problems, it would be impossible for Toshio and Seishin to check every grave in secret, he didn't think that the efforts would pay off. After all, Seishin's throat was dry. The rotting scent was still clinging to his nose.

There were an absurd number of dead, in well built graves, and in some percentage of those graves slept rotting bodies. Just thinking of peeking in on that and confirming it, as expected, left him feeling despair. Somehow he wanted to at least avoid that much, Seishin thought, unable to deny the self serving thought.

Maybe thinking the same thing, Toshio murmured. "First thing's to stop the Shiki from multiplying from here on," he said looking to Seishin. "If they're sucking blood, then to start with to make sure they don't rise up, you'd stake them before burying them, if I remember."

Seishin made a face. He could feel a physiological aversion to that. That was damaging a corpse. If the dead body were certain to rise up, that might have been a precautionary measure. But there were those who didn't revive. Staking such a body was none other than desiccation of a corpse, and even the act of 'hitting a stake in' itself had a terrible cruelty to it.

"Seishin, there isn't a more proper way to do it, is there?"

"...In the case of vampyr, typically they are staked and reburied. Or otherwise their head's cut off. Otherwise, they open a hole in the dead body's leg. There's also folklore of burying them face down."

"All of those'd be impossible."

"Or we could set up a blade at their neck, drive a spike in through the mound..... If the dead body does rise up, that could be set up to react at that time automatically digging into the body. Or we could put a net out, filling it with grains or sowing seeds."

"Heh?"

"Vampyr have to count every grain of rice, according to some folklore. Also it seems like they can't pick up more than a single grain per year. ....But as if that would apply in the case of Shiki."

"In the first place all of those are fishy. Isn't there something more, you know, something we could put into the casket without it looking strange?"

"Crosses, holy icons, medals..."

"Or Honzons or talismen?"

"But they're set with blades and juzu in hand. In both Nao-san and Shuuji-san's coffin, there were protective blades and juzu in with them. It's doubtful they have an effect."

Toshio groaned. "What else are we supposed to do? If only drugs worked. If they do, I could inject paraquat to stop them from being reborn, making it look like an innocent treatment when they die. But I don't know what it'll take to keep them from being able to be revived. If only we had the custom of embalming. ---To start with, I don't know if embalming would stop them from being reborn either, but. To be sure it'd have to be cremation, obviously."

Seishin could only agree with that.

"But cremation is..."

"The bunch in the village won't go for that. To get them go for it, we'd need a hell of an excuse, but I don't think they're going to believe us once we talk about Shiki or vampires. As a back-up plan we can say there's a huge plague spreading, we do have that on hand, but."

Seishin thought a bit about what would happen if they went to that end.

A plague. So burial was dangerous. They needed to cremate. If they pushed it, what percentage of the villagers would abide by it?

"That might be hopeless... Or at least, without the Administration making it compulsory."

People couldn't escape thinking only about themselves. This would stop the problem, but that and one's pride were different matters of different perspectives. Amongst the villagers was a clear line of thought on how a dead body must be handled. Doing harm to the corpse was thought of along the same lines as doing harm to the living family members. The problem was not whether they could do it or not, it was the resistance to it that they would face. They would be reluctant to cremate. There was probably nobody who would choose that option. And yet all the same, nobody wished to lose themselves or to lose those surviving family members. The plague was menacing. That harmed the living. As expected there would be opposition to leaving the menacing threat unchecked as well. The villager's choices were limited to two options in this. They could either look at the safety of the living as paramount and reluctantly choose to cremate or they could view the desire not to harm the corpse as paramount and expose the living to that threat.

And, Seishin thought, when man was faced with a choice in which all of the options were negative, they could fabricate a third choice that didn't actually exist--a positive one. It was possible the villagers would think: "That couldn't happen"---and it wasn't just limited to thinking they would be safe from the danger. It wasn't impossible for at least their own family to avoid it. As long as their own family weren't involved, they could avoid making an unpleasant decision.

Maybe Toshio understood that as he sighed and nodded. "Saying that it's a plague and setting them into an uproad'd be a waste... If that's the case, then the only choice is something we can do in secret, but."

Seishin shook his head. This was in itself an unpleasant choice.

"At any rate, we have to stop this before it gets worse. We can't leave the corpses as they are, so we have to make it so there're no more corpses."

"Aa," Seishin nodded but when trying to think of what they would need to do to ensure that, he couldn't help feeling further reluctant. Magic was effective. In order to protect his patients, Toshio's treatment measures and spiritual techniques to evade their attacks were indispensable. The ones to provide as much could only be the shrine or the temple, and they couldn't turn to the shrine that had no chief priest for that. It had to be the temple. In other words, the temple would have to pray to disperse the plague, was what it came down to. It would involve going around to the victim's houses and praying to disperse the illness. But Seishin was not accustomed to such a spiritual idology.

"We'll need to do a mushi-okuri again. We'll put the traveller's guardian deities back up, round up the village again and do another mushi-okuri."

"With what explanation?"

That was in the way of every counter-trategy.

"Whatever the case we'll have to do it. Moreover we'll have to decrease the number of Shiki."

Seishin looked to Toshio's face. Toshio raised a brow in surprise.

"What're you surprised about? It's obvious, isn't it? We have to exterminate the Shiki. As long as one of them is alive, the contamination will spread."

"But."

"But what?"

Seishin could quickly feel his convictions wavering. He believed there were Shiki, but he realized he was thinking still that that

could be wrong. ---No, Seishin was clinging to the hope that it wasn't Shiki. That in itself was in order to reject making an unpleasant choice.

"Shuuji-san might have been reborn. If he did, he might be attacking people right now."

"There's no might be about it."

"But it isn't confirmed. All we've confirmed is that there's no body in the grave."

"Oi, oi," Toshio said, his eyes widening. "Do we need anything more than that?"

"You may be right but...." Seishin hung his head. "Let's say Shuuji-san has revived. And right now he is spreading the contamination. It's true that we have to stop the spread but to do that, will we have to kill Shuuji0san again?"

"Is there any other way?"

"But wouldn't it mean Shuuji-san is alive? And can he be killed? By us?"

"It's not killing. Shuuji-san was dead already."

"But now he's alive. Isn't that right? That Shuuji-san revived isn't really something Shuuji-san is responsible for. It's an unfortunate accident, and so."

"What are you trying to say?"

"What I mean," Seishin hesitated. He didn't know how to say it himself. "Shuuji-san is dead, but he's reborn. Rising up means to return to life doesn't it? In other words, if a patient had gone into cardiac arrest once, putting them into that condition again would be called killing them wouldn't it? What part of that's different from murder?"

"Oi, oi. We're talking about Shiki, right?"

"Whether they're Shiki or anything else, doesn't it still stand? Of course, Shiki attack people. They spread the contamination. But even if they are murderers, say, can we just execute them at our leisure? Even if it's said that we can't leave them alive, we don't have the right to kill people."

"Don't sidestep the problem."

"Sidestep?"

"You're putting the Shiki equal with the people they're attacking. What's going to come of thinking of them on the same level as people who are part of society who commit murder? Of course we don't have the right to punish murderers. That's the government's job. But is there a law for judging Shiki? The government's not going to step in and do it for us."

"Even so."

"You're just saying that out of cowardice. At the heart of it you're afraid of having to do something to a Shiki yourself, huh? I get that you're opposed to it. So, since you're afraid and don't want to kill Shiki, you're going to leave the Shiki to attack people? Shiki dying is terrible, people dying aren't?"

"That's...."

"Are you saying to sit quiet and watch while the victims are adding up? If we leave even one Shiki alive, then they'll add to the number of Shiki by geometric progression. The number of victims will go on growing. There's no opposition to that anywhere inside of you?"

Seishin didn't have the words to argue. He was indeed right. What Toshio was saying was correct. If returning the Shiki to their dead state was murder then the Shiki attacking people was likewise murder as well. If killing Shiki were a sin, then Shiki killing people was also the same sin. If one replaced Shiki with murderer in the argument, the reasoning was clear. Of course he had to approve hunting the Shiki as a form of self-defense.

(……Really?)

The reasoning was clear, Seishin thought even while unable to assent to it. In the first place, he hesitated to replace Shiki with murderers in this. That hesitance was not something Seishin could express well.

"Are you going to just watch the village die?" Toshio asked as Seishin hung his head in shame.

"Let me think about it just a little."

"---Oi!"

Seishin stood up and left Toshio behind as he ran down to the village road. He was literally running away.

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4

The church altar was, as it had been and as it seemingly always would be, standing withered in the emptiness. Basked in the lamp's glow, only the dust covered candlestick reflected the light.

He could not see the God he should serve--he thought on how what Sunako had said was correct. If one believed that justice was the justice determined to be common in the human world, then the Shiki should be eliminated. Shiki hunted people. That was bad and that made the Shiki an enemy. In order to eradicate evil, they had to hunt the Shiki, that was simply a religious crusade necessary to uphold justice. And yet Seishin struggled with that. There was no mistake that Shiki were the enemy of people but could it really be said that in hunting people Shiki were thereby evil?

Seishin's conscience whispered to him. This isn't their sin. Nao and Shuuji didn't exactly wish to be transformed into Shiki did they? Much less to become Shiki specifically in order to slaughter. Was it something that could unequivocally be condemned as a sin, that while it was antagonizing, it could still be judged as evil?

He knew that he would be in the minority for thinking this. A God that did not have a large number of followers could not be called absolute. But justice that was defined by its adherents was not justice to Seishin. A God who would punish those without sin, without hesitation, was not God. --At least, not to Seishin.

The empty church, the empty altar, even if there were a priest there would be no God here. There was only a faithful adherence towards one's decision. There was no doubt that the recluse who built these ruins resonated with Seishin. He couldn't help but come here in order to affirm to himself that he was not alone in the

world.

Even kowing that much, he did not know what it was that he should do. The village was falling prey to disaster. While he was hesitating thusly the victims went on multipltiny. Those who rose up as Shiki bore no sin but nor did those victims who were losing their lives to the Shiki. He couldn't affirm them being unreasonably attacked by another. Affirmation and approval were the same thing. That said, he couldn't approve of it, and somebody did have to stop this calamity. And the only ones who could do that were those who had realized the truth of the matter, only Toshio and Seishin.

Seishin let out a heavy sigh, head dropping as if with that breath he'd let out all of his power. Behind him was the clatter, the small sound of the door opening.

"Good evening."

Seishin wordlessly turned to look behind him. 'It' which took the form of a little girl came into the small shrine the same as she always had, taking very light footsteps towards the nave of the church.

"....Are you depressed again?"

Mm,

Seishin nodded.

"You still haven't been able to make up with Dr. Ozaki?"

"No. It's something else."

Sunako tilted her head. She sat down on the nearby bench. She was close enough he could reach out and touch her. Seishin suddenly wondered why he had been safe all of this time. Sunako could have added Seishin to the line of victims at any time. It was possible she was refraining on purpose. Just as Toshio arbitrarily chose which to save and which not to save, it felt as if Sunako too was arbitrarily determining who to kill and who not to kill.

"Are things going so badly in the village?"

"That's right. It's terrible."

How terrible, Sunako said, her voice sounding to Seishin as if it were almost tinged with true compassion.

"Toshio is deadlocked. No, he was being deadlocked I guess I should say. While it looks like a plague is spreading, there's no means to counteract the plague. It might be a new strain of a plague but it has points where it's not like an plague to it. So he can't counter or cure it."

"That really is terrible. But you used the past tense didn't you?"

Seishin nodded.

"It's not just the plague. Lately, there've been many leaving the village. The inhabitants leave things vague and disappear. The person cooperating with us from the town hall also disappeared. It's hard to see as anything other than disappearances."

".....That's strange. But, it has nothing to do with the plague, does it?"

"Normally you'd think it wouldn't. Those who've died of this plague have quit their jobs right before dying. The people who commute from the village for work, almost without exception, resign. Even this would normally be unrelated to a plague."

Sunako frowned faintly.

"....These isn't a normal situation. These aren't normal moves or resignations, and since all of these confirm to a pattern, we can only assume something there's something abnormal behind it. That's what Toshio concluded. If you assume the existence of something unusual, the situation makes sense. ---So it was past tense."

Sunako gazed heavily as Seishin. A pathetic silence fell. In that moment. All that he could hear echoing through the church in that moment was his own quieted breath. And that was likely all there was.

Sunako averted her gaze, then looked up. Her white face wore a

smile free of any malice.

"Something unusual?"

"....Abel."

Sunako's smile faltered for only a brief moment.

"That really is unusual."

"Something made to kill by others. Something that's killed, buries, and yet rises from the grave. ...A Shiki."

Sunako lowered her head and let out a giggling voice. "I'm surprised. That Dr. Ozaki was such a romantist, I mean."

"This is something more prosaic. It's a decisively brutal reality. It's merciless and inorganic."

"....Oh?"

"I think that you are a Shiki...."

Sunako looked up, smiling. "Really, Muroi-san is such a romantist!"

"Am I?"

Yes, Sunako said standing up. In an instant Seishin stiffened. His breath held, he watched Sunako from behind as Sunako turned her back and went towards the nave of the church. Sunako walked, and then stopped walking to turn around.

"Say, Muroi-san, where do you think it was that Cain was ostracized from?"

Seishin tilted his head.

"The other day, I suddenly thought of this. When God made Adam and Eve, he made the Garden of Eden for them to live in. But Adam and Eve were banished from the Garden of Eden when they took

the forbidden fruit. So Cain was born on that land they were banished too, wasn't he?"

"And chased out to the land Nodo east of Eden...."

"Right? So where was Cain?"

"Probably still Eden. The plot of land called Eden had a garden within it, and Adam and Eve were banished from the garden. But it was still within Eden."

Sunako shook her head.

"That isn't what I mean. The Garden of Eden was paradise, right? Since Adam and Eve were banished from paradise for their sin, wouldn't Nodo be a penal colony outside of Eden? I wonder what there was outside of the penal colony."

Seishin blinked.

"The blessed land and the desolate land. Paradise and a penal colony---if the world was split into these two parts, then outside of the penal colony must be Paradise, musn't it?" Sunako smiled from far away. "Isn't it interesting? Cain was driven from the penal colony for his sin, meaning he was banished to paradise. God might have regarded Cain as a madman and sheltered him away in paradise then quite possibly, yes? Or if that weren't so, as judgment for killing a sinner in a penal colony, his sin was forgiven and he may have been called back to Paradise."

Seishin started to stand.

"The one who killed those who should be punished within a penal colony, isn't he a murderer? Or is he a just man?"

With a small laugh, Sunako turned around. Without leaving time for him to call to stop her, she slid out through the slanted doors.

Seishin stood at a loss for words.

Now he thought on it as mysterious.

(Paradise, and the penal colony surrounding it.)

Did the wasteland exist around the hill or did the hill exist within the wasteland?

(The one who killed sinners was...

Did the high ramparts enclosing the foot of the hill denote the terminus of God's order,

That sin was...)

or instead did it note the boundaries of God's miracle?

sinnesspiel

5

When his eyes opened he was in an unfamiliar small room. For a while he remained lying down observing his surroundings, thinking on why it was that he was lying on such a hard bedding in this worn down room.

He had been sleeping until just a moment ago. And then his eyes opened. That was all that he could remember but despite the fact that there was surely more to his memory than that, he couldn't get a firm grasp on it. He thought on why he was awakening in a room he'd never seen before and found it strange but if that was strange, then it was strange too that when he tried to think of what room he should have woken up in that nothing came to mind.

Unable to come to a conclusion he sat up. There was nothing but a single futon. There was nothing else in the room. The ceiling above was made of old wooden blanks, and the light bulb was out, covered in dust. Not only was there no light, when he looked about there was no window either. Even so, was light coming in from somewhere? It wasn't so dark that his surroundings couldn't be seen. There was no color to anything and yet in the blue tinted scene he could make out all of the details clearly.

Three of the walls were covered in plaster. That was falling down here and there. The remaining wall was plastered with plywood. Those planks looked new but because they were only nailed in place they did more to give the impression of being run down than the falling stucco. The futon was putrid and the surrounding floorboards were coated in trails of dust, a rotting dampness on the air.

It's like I was thrown away and abandoned out here, he thought.

It was like a hidden room in a house that had been forgotten about, now completely unused. ---The reason he thought that was because when listening to the sounds about the area, he had the feeling he was in a place deep within a relatively large building. Somewhere far off were people. And they were in the same building, he had the feeling.

He stood up, then noticed a door on the nearby plaster wall. He knew that this door alone had newer workmanship. He tried the doorknob but the door didn't open. It seemed to be locked but from the inside there was no sign of a keyhole or lock mechanism.

(Why.....)

It must have been locked. And from the outside. He was in this run down room, alone by himself, and in a room he'd never seen, a room he couldn't very well think people stayed or lived in. There were rooms in the Edo period that lunatics were kept in, maybe this was one of those.

(But why?)

He couldn't understand why he was trapped in this place. Much less could he tell where this was, or even take a guess at it. Something must have happened. Something must have happened to him, and so here he was in some unusual place, that was reality but what happened before now, what he was doing in what kind of place, no matter how much he tried to remember, was all incredibly vague.

While trying to push on the door, he cocked his head in puzzlement when he heard footsteps on the other side of the door. Without thinking about it, he shrunk back towards the end of the door. With the sound of the lock being undone the door opened. As expected there was no light beyond the door either but even so in the blue tinted dimness, he could make out the features of the person who stepped in.

"So you've woken up."

He did remember seeing the young man who said that to him

with a smile. Even though he was positive he had, he couldn't remember who it was. he didn't think they were a dangerous person but he instinctively retreated. He was uneasy being so uncertain, and he felt out of place. He didn't know the reason for that.

The man casually approached, and suddenly he murmured "stay away." ---Or he tried to, but his voice wouldn't come. His voice wasn't coming, he thought, wildly disturbed. At the same time, he felt an emptiness, a hole within his body, which served to panic him further.

Something was wrong. It was like he'd drifted into a bad dream, unease and uncertainty coiling about him, the feeling that something was separating him from reality.

"You don't need to be afraid, Murasako Masao-kun." the man said. With that he could remember that that was his own name. "I am your ally. So there's no need to fear. You don't need to worry, so calm down, now."

Masao shook his head. Before he knew it he was cornered in the room. He wanted to say not to come any closer but as expected his voice wouldn't come. His vocal cords weren't paralyzed, and it wasn't as if he couldn't form the words, it literally felt like his voice was just not coming out.

The man nodded as if understanding that.

"I'm called Tatsumi. We met before, right? I'm your ally. So there's nothing to be afraid of. So try breathing in deeply and slowly. Talk like that. All righty?"

Masao shook his head vehemently, but still took in a deep breath, then spit it out. Something about it felt strange. To put it into words was difficult. If he were forced to, he would say it didn't feel like breathing deeply. Then what should he do, he tried to think of that but came upon nothing, leaving him uneasy.

"Calm down now." Tatsumi was close enough now to reach out an arm and touch him. "It's all right. There isn't anything to worry about. In fact dispelling your uneasiness is just what I've come here

for, you see."

Masao shoot his head, crouching in place. The unease and the confusion piled and piled up, as if piling up to overcome something, and he felt cornered.

"....Stay away."

At last his voice came, but that voice was broken. He realized he was on the verge of crying from his own voice.

"Stay away, I said!"

All right, Tatsumi smiled. He took a natural step back and took a seat on the floor. He peered at Masao's face as he was huddled, crouching against the wall.

"It's all right. I won't do anything."

"...Where, is this?"

"It's home."

"Is not."

"Then, to put it another way, shall I say it's a safe place? From now on you, see, this will be your home, Masao-kun."

Feeling like he couldn't understand any of what was being said, Masao earnestly shook his head. Tatsumi even so continued to smile. He at least seemed to sympathize with Masao.

"Mm. I do understand how terribly confused you are. If I tell you the place you've never seen before is home, you would only become more confused after all, I guess, huh? ---Yes, you wouldn't remember seeing this room. You don't know what's happened to you, so you only have the feeling that something abnormal's happened. You must feel like something's off, mustn't you?"

As he'd put it quite rightly, Masao nodded. Tatsumi was scary for no particular reason but at the same time it was a relief that he understood an unease Masao himself found hard to put into words.

"I don't think that's unfounded. ---Are you listening? You've been reborn."

Masao tilted his head.

"It really is good, I think," Tatsumi said with a smile. "But even if I say reborn, it might not click with you. No---you really don't need to worry. That's how it is for everyone. Everyone is confused at first. But soon now you'll calm down, you'll realize what a great fortune you've been blessed with and will be quite happy," Tatsumi said, looking at Masao. "Do you know what it is that you're wearing?"

Masao looked down at himself. He was wearing something like a white kimono. It was splattered here and there with dirt.

"This..."

"It's a burial kimono. And with the right side tucked under the left. It's the opposite in formal meetings. Do you understand why?"

Masao looked down in bafflement as his thin hemp kimono. Right under left was the style reserved for the dead, wasn't it? Or did he have it backwards? He tried desperately to remember but it was all unclear.

"Yes, those are burial clothes. ....You were once buried."

That's ridiculous, Masao murmured. Tatsumi smiled as if sympathetic.

"Mm, I understand wanting to call it ridiculous. But, it really is true. You were considered dead and buried. But you were reborn. In other words you weren't really dead. I saved you from waking up in the coffin. I'm the one who brought you here."

"....That's."

"You can't remember? You were in bad shape. You were tired, in pain, you couldn't bear it. And you were getting even worse. Unable to move at all, you lost consciousness."

Masao opened his eyes. ---Yes, his condition was bad. He

remembered that suffering. It was hard, so hard, and eventually he couldn't move at all. And yet nobody in his family would take notice of his poor condition. With nobody to bring water to ease his throat, even if he moaned, nobody would so much as peek in at him. Without a doubt he died like that, Masao thought with a gasp. ---And then.

"……I." He lost consciousness, and they must have mistook him for dead. The moment he thought that, the hair on his body stood on end. He was buried while still alive. If he hadn't been saved, there was no doubt that he'd have woken up in a narrow coffin. Nobody would have noticed, nobody would have come to help him, he'd bang on the lid, unable to get out to the surface---and within that narrow coffin once again he would die.

"……You s, saved me?"

"That's right. I dug you up from the grave. I have a good nose. So I knew, since there wasn't the smell of death coming from your grave. There wasn't a rotting smell. So I knew that you would be reborn."

Masao let out a breath. He didn't remember being buried but he felt gratitude for being saved and dug out from the bottom of his heart.

"Thank.... you."

"Sure. I really am glad you were reborn to us! Do you remember why your health was failing?"

Masao blinked and shook his head. Was there a reason at all that his heath had been failing he thought, when at that moment a single man's face sprung from the back of his mind.

"....I."

"Somebody did that to you. .... Am I right?"

At Tatsumi's whisper, Masao nodded. Shiveringly, he stood up. That was the day Tohru had died, when coming back from the Mutou house. Somebody was in the back yard. They came flying at

Masao. He was put into a full Nelson and then---.

"I... was attacked."

By whom, Tatsumi asked in a whisper as he leaned forward.

"....It was Yuzuki-san... From the library."

"That's right," Tatsumi smiled. "That is correct! And then you died. Do you get it? You died and rose up."

Masao let out a scream. Yuzuki's face, the sensation the moment he was attacked, wonder and terror---and the suffering that followed. Isolated in his room, labored breathing ignored by his family, with nobody to blame or to help him, nobody even asking if he was all right. Masao lied alone in his room. The helplessness and fear. He feared the night. Somebody outside the window. Asking to be let in, Masao knowing he absolutely must not let them in, knowing all the while that if they came in he would be driven into an even more terrifying situation, but all the same opening the window for his visitor as if being controlled. Someone come and stop this, he screamed in his heart but even while despairing that it was certain nobody would come to save him, until in the end he was unable to get in a proper breath and with his hands clawing at his own throat for a long while or was it but a moment, the end of his consciousness came upon him.

Masao screamed now after all this time. He let out his terror, a scream for help---the scream that formerly couldn't move past his throat, now was able to tear through to leak out.

"It's all right." Tatsumi gripped Masao's arm. Shaking that off and stepping back, Masao crashed into the wall and clawed at it. Tatsumi took hold of him and with an arm around his shoulder stroked his fingers soothingly. "---There isn't anything to be afraid of. It's all right now. You died. But you've risen up. Those scary thoughts, those painful thoughts are over now."

"I,...." Masao struggled. "...No way. Damn it, this isn't funny. Khu, let me go!"

"Would you rather have died? Like your nephew? Hiromi-kun, wasn't it? Would you rather really be dead like that boy?"

"......Hiromi." Masao's eyes opened. ---Right, Hiromi was dead. His family was grieving that, and they didn't notice that Masao was suffering. Munehide, Munetaka, Chizuko. "Hiromi.... is dead?"

"Unfortunately so," Tatsumi nodded. "Not everyone who dies is reborn. Hiromi-kun wasn't reborn. When I dug you up, there was the smell of rotting meat coming from Hiromi-kun's grave."

Masao shrunk into himself. Rotting--decaying. Yes, that was what happened when you returned to the earth. The body became a host to germs and insects, devoured, melting down, into a form that would be terrible to lay eyes on.

"But, you were fortunately reborn. So you won't rot anymore, nor will you die. You were lucky! After all, you're one of the few people who were reborn. Most of them rot without being reborn."

Masao looked at his own hands. Certainly he was here now. Nothing had changed from before. But about his body was something out of place he couldn't wipe away.

"I, died.....? That's a lie, isn't it?"

"You died. Take a look for yourself. You aren't breathing."

"That's just..."

"You aren't. The reason it feels like you are is because you're putting out air to talk. Go ahead and try stopping. It won't hurt or anything."

Masao, flustered, stopped his breath. No change occurred to his body. Of course he didn't feel like he was choking, and the heavy feeling in the nose and behind the ears when one stopped breathing was nowhere to be felt.

"......I." That was the out of place something he'd felt within his own body. In Masao's body was some sort of emptiness. Something had certainly felt missing from his senses.

"There's also no pulse. No heart beat. You've transformed. You can tell, can't you?"

"What the hell.... is this? What's going on?"

"You won't have to die again. And I am your ally. Since I'm your ally, I carried you who were buried to here, which is a safe place."

"No! I..."

"Now, listen? You're going to have to accept this. Of course, you are free to refuse this, too. If you're against it no matter what, then I will kill you if that's what you want. How about it?"

Masao trembled. "....No."

"Right, you don't want to die, do you? You don't want to go through that twice, do you?"

Masao nodded. Whether he was breathing or not, that didn't matter either way. Either way he "was." As long as he existed, he was aware of himself. That was something he just couldn't bear to lose again. If he could go on like this without having to lose that again, he didn't care if he had to be like this.

"You've come through without dying. But that said, it's not as if you're completely immortal. If you think it's important that you were so fortunately reborn, there are three things you'll need to take to heart."

"......Three things?"

"That's right. The first is not to starve. Starvation will kill you. Just like a living human."

Masao nodded.

"However, you can't eat anymore. At least, not normal food. You could say that you can only take in a very specialized diet now. Do you know what that is?"

Masao shook his head. Tatsumi gave a low laugh.

"Yuzuki-san rose up too. He was reborn. And he was feeding."

Masao's mouth gaped open, and then without thinking his right hand touched his neck. Indeed, Yuzuki had---.

"If you're going to remain alive, you will need people's blood."

"……Blood." Masao's eyes widened so far the corner seemed about to split. "….A vampire."

"Or whatever you'd like to call it. Your body can only take in blood from now on. Even if you take it into your body, your body can't digest it. Solid foods are no good. Don't eat them. It'll rot in your stomach and let out a terrible smell."

"I'm..."

"In order to live, you need human blood. If you don't have it, you will starve to death. First, you'll have to accept this as deeply as your gut."

"That's..."

"In order for you to feed, you must attack people. But, humans are not so easy to attack. If they're attacked, they will die like you after all. If they know that something that's a danger to their lives is multiplying, they'll resist. You won't die anymore but you aren't immortal. If you're staked through the heart or if your head is cut off, or if your head is crushed you will die. To be sure they don't do that to you, you'll have to be very careful and attentive."

"I... don't have any choice but to attack people? I have to attack and kill them?"

"Right," Tatsumi said with a low laugh. "But, you don't need to worry about it. Because it's the same as humans killing livestock to survive. Until now you've been killing animals and taking them in to live. From now on you'll be killing people to live. This is a natural thing. It can't be helped. It's not something to be anxious bout."

Masao's eyes were wide.

"Second. Your body has changed. One thing you'll have to be careful about is that your body is weak to sunlight. Your body will burn and wither away. Your body hates the sun. And the daytime when the sun shines. You'll sleep when dawn breaks. This is deep sleep you can't resist. As dawn nears, you'll become so sleepy you can't bear it, and as dawn comes you'll lose consciousness. You won't wake from that until sunset but if you fall asleep someplace careless during that time, your body will burn up and you'll die in your sleep. You must be aware of the time. Be sure to return to a safe space before dawn."

"That's.... I, I don't think I can do that."

"You don't need to worry. I told you, I'm your ally, didn't I? For a little while until you get used to your new life, I'll be looking after you plenty, and my companions will be looking after you too."

"...Companions?"

"Yup, we have companions. For a while we'll be sure to have you go with somebody. Somebody with more experience being risen than you. They'll teach you things. So like I said, you don't need to worry."

"I... I get it."

"Third. We will be taking care of you. Until you're used to this new way of living we'll look after you and we'll tell you what you need to know. We'll be protecting you, supporting you. Our companions are like a family. But there is one condition to it. You must absolutely listen to what I say. I know what you must do to safely live a long life. For that, you need to have certain fundamental knowledge, and I'm conveying it to you. But, if you should perhaps have a change of heart and put our companions at risk, then I will show no mercy in removing our protection from you. We must be united above all else. Turning against us will not be forgiven. You get it, right?"

"That's..."

"Now listen. Amongst our companions, I'm a bit special, I don't

sleep even during the day. I can even go out walking. If I feel like it, after you've fallen asleep, I can take you out to an appropriate place for punishment. I can stake you and cut off your head. You mustn't forget that."

Masao shrank into himself.

"Don't be afraid. I don't particularly want to do anything cruel of course. Keeping my companions safe takes priority. If humans became aware of us, there'd surely be a counter attack now wouldn't there? We have to be quite watchful to make sure that doesn't happen, and if somebody were to act selfishly all of our companions would be in danger, so I just need to warn against it."

"But, I" didn't even want to be revived, Masao tried to say but Tatsumi talked over him.

"As the numbers of our companions grows, a leader is a necessity. Somebody has to think of every advantage and put things in order. The people of the Kirishiki family have undertaken that. I convey their ideas to the lot of you. So you musn't go against what I say. This is to keep you personally safe as well. You understand, don't you?"

Masao nodded. Tatsumi smiled and took out a paper bag. He took out a bundle of clothes and handed them out. "For now, change into these. We'll get what you need to get by little by little."

Masao did just as he was told, stripping off the white clothing and putting on the terribly normal cotton pants and sweatshirt. How did he even get his hands on these, he thought. Tatsumi must have bought them during the day time, and the Kirishiki family must have put up the funds for it.

It makes sense---Masao thought. So the Kirishiki family were the main culprits. The bad things that had been happening since summer, and in particular the continuous run of deaths were done with the Kirishiki family as the ringleaders.

(Vampires...)

It was so stupid. It was like a joke that something like that could even exist but it was even more of one for he himself to become one. But while putting on his clothing, Masao forgot to breathe. If he wasn't talking, there was no need to. Unless doing it manually, his body stopped automatically.

"I.... really did die."

"You sure did," said Tatsumi in a gentle voice. "It's good you were able to revive."

Masao nodded. Dying this young was something he'd pass on. Masao didn't want to die. He still hadn't done anything. He didn't have any fun memories and still hadn't seen any good days. Dying like that wasn't even funny, he thought. Tatsumi said one of many did. Masao had won a very risky gamble.

(Hiromi is dead... He didn't come back.)

Somehow, he didn't feel that bad. Masao didn't like Hiromi. Cheeky little runt. he had the entire family fussing over him alone, he was allowed to do whatever he wanted, but now he was gone. To be honest, Masao felt triumphant, even.

Masao died once. Dread had seized Masao. But nobody had understood Masao's fear, the family too busy fussing over Hiromi to give Masao so much as a glance. Within his dulled thoughts, Masao died confirming to himself that they never once turned to look after him. ---Yes, within that family, Masao was isolated. He died alone.

Those was his pitiful environment until now. But Masao never had to return to that house again. Munehide and Munetaka weren't his problem anymore. Munetaka wasn't dead. Now nobody else would compare Masao and Munetaka. When thinking of how he was released from so many oppressions, a smile rose to his face.

"Did something happen to help you calm down?" Tatsumi asked, to which Masao nodded.

"I became one of your companions didn't I?"

"You sure did. A precious companion."

Being told that made him feel good. "Precious, you mean it?"

"Well of course I do. There aren't many of us after all, now are there?"

"Mm."

Masao was a "special child." Even with his brothers, he was special, younger, specially pampered, raised especially selfishly, he was told. But all the same the truth was that Masao wasn't the least bit special at all. And so Masao had wanted to become something that actually was "special." He thought he should be. But he couldn't be. Not when nobody around understood, not when nobody around had any mercy. And then at last he had really become "special."

Tatsumi stared directly at Masao's face. As if seeing through Masao's change of heart. And then he asked.

"Do you feel like you could eat?"

"Eat..." Masao was startled.

"The first time you attack somebody, it does take a little courage. So I won't say to attack somebody from the start. If you don't have the determination to do it yet, I'll bring you what you need."

"....Blood?"

"Yup," Tatsumi smiled. "In a cup, you see. Though you can't drink that without a bit of courage either. But you'll get used to it bit by bit. Now that you've changed, you shouldn't be bothered by unpleasant smells or tastes anymore. Rather, at first everybody makes an unpleasant face but they say the taste isn't bad. It just feels bad, but it's not anything especially unpleasant to drink."

Masao nodded but he felt something repulsive clogging his throat.

"Just, this can't go on forever. You're like a child until your first attack. We can look after you like a child forever but children don't get much. You remember, don't you? When you were a child, you

were missing out on so many delicious parts of life."

"....Yeah."

"Attack and kill your first. That's, well, like our initiation, you could say."

"......Killing."

"In order for us to eat, livestock must die. If that scares you, you can't eat. On the other hand, if you become skilled at targeting prey, you can even stand out. It has nothing to do with your age. Who knows how much time will lapse after being reborn. Once you can stand before us and be treated like an adult, you can do special things, prove that you're clever, once you can do things good for our companions, then you can be bestowed with a special position even amongst our companions."

"*I*

can?"

"That's right.

You

can." Tatsumi said, putting an encouraging arm around his shoulder. "Ever since I knew you should be revived, I prepared a meal for you. I've made it so that he can't resist or fight. It's safe to attack him. So you don't need to worry. But if you aren't ready to take that stop, for the time being I'll bring you what you need. --- Which will it be?"

"I..."

"The prey can't resist. It can't do a thing to hurt you. At first he may look at you with hateful eyes but once you attack, he'll become calm. When we attack, you see, they end up feeling pretty good. Afterwards, they really do put up no resistance at all. They don't say anything particularly hateful, nor look at you with resentment.

Some people even come to be quite happy to be attacked."

"Really.....?"

"It's really so. If they're attacked they will die but you don't need to fear that happening. That can't be helped if we're to survive, so it's only natural. If you don't attack people, you will be the one to die. Nobody could blame you saying that if somebody has to die that it should be you. That's just how it is, right?"

".....Mm."

"So that's why you don't need to be afraid of leading to their death. There's no need to hesitate to kill. No matter how many or who you kill, none of our companions will blame you. Rather, you'll be praised for doing the right thing."

"That.... means that it's good to kill people?"

"That's right," Tatsumi smiled. "For you see, you? You've obtained the special right to kill."

Masao shuddered.

"..... But, I won't be forgiven if I attack people I know or people I'm close to, will I?"

"Why not? We'd welcome it. Especially blood relations. You were reborn. Whether one's reborn or not? That's hereditary. It's probably a matter of genetics, I think. Comparing houses where at least one has risen and houses where none have, it seems easier to rise if one already has. So you can attack your family. The more the merrier, after all, yes?"

"But,... Let's say there's somebody I don't like, so I choose to attack them, that's bad, isn't it?"

"Why is that bad? I mean, you have to attack somebody either way."

Masao's eyes were wide. In an instant, Natsuno's face crossed his mind. He could kill. He could obliterate him. The fact that Hiromi

was already dead was just a bit of a shame, he thought.

Bit by bit, delight or something similar to it swelled up within him. With that, Masao could feel something bolstering him up.

"So how about it? Will you gather your courage and try an attack?" a gentle voice whispered, to which Masao nodded.

"..... I'll try it."

Tatsumi gave a low chuckle. "What an admirable young man you are."

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6

(Monzen, Sakaimatsu---Matsuo, Shizuka)

With the CD headphones blaring in his ears, Natsuno sat atop his bed whittling the wood. Natsuno didn't have anybody he knew in Monzen. No matter how many times he tried to reconsider, he didn't have any memory of the name Matsuo Shizuka. Much less of a grade school girl called such. He couldn't come up with any reason at all for her to come visit.

("Her big brother" huh...)

A girl with the name Matsuo Shizuka apparently said "my big brother will be coming later." Natsuno somehow had the feeling that that "big brother" of hers would be the man he encountered at Motohashi Tsuruko's gravesite. It was possible. If he was one of them, there would be proof that Natsuno was aware of a major secret.

Based on the kind of child Matsuo Shizuka was, he thought it was fairly clear what her role was. Saying she had some business with Natsuno, she asked to be let to wait. With that, she had an invitation into the house. And then Shizuka got an invitation for her "big brother" too.

The only light was from the lamp and the CD player. The room light was turned off, the reason the lamp lit the room, was in order to better feel the surrounding darkness, because he needed to feel like he was the only one suspended uneasily within the sea of darkness.

Within the low light, he shaved down five centimeters of wood,

joining together ten centimeters of crosswire. So then, would this actually be any use?

(It's a matter of faith.)

That's how it went in stories, he thought. No matter how many crosses you use, if you don't have faith it won't be any use. ---But Natsuno to begin with didn't have faith aligned with any sect or denomination. For now all he had were the juzu beads given to him by his parents on the day of Megumi's funeral, he didn't have anything else beyond a few paper charms.

Should I hole up at Tamotsu's place after all? he thought. But But now that a child had come to call on him specifically targeting him, he had the feeling he couldn't get Tamotsu tangled up in all this. And besides, he thought. The Mutou family already had a victim. That house probably isn't closed to them anymore. Then that was all the more reason that he couldn't rely on Tamotsu and expose him to any further danger.

While thinking that, he put the two planks together and wrapped them with wire. It was better to have it than not to. Right now it was no safer for Natsuno than being outside. While they lurked outside the walls for the time being he didn't know what kind of things his opponents actually were, so he couldn't feel safe inside.

The thing was that his hands still remembered the sensation. The feedback from hitting the man ("Big brother".....). That was the distinct feel of contacting a corporeal body. He didn't think they could become smoke and seep in through the walls or just phase through them, not with such an unimaginably, unforgivingly real sensation. Thinking of that, the walls and the windowpanes may have served as a barrier after all. A lock might have some worth after all, he realized. The problem was that he couldn't by any means close every aperture in the house.

The window had a crescent lock but there was no lock to Natsuno's room. For the time being he forced the top board of a kotatsu under the door handle, but he didn't know how useful that would be. He locked up the entryway. Same with the workshop's door. But as expected he couldn't lock up his parent's bedroom

windows. Ever since moving to this village, his parents abandoned the custom of locking anything. The back door, several windows, all of them were distinctly unlocked.

Come tomorrow he had to find a way to lock them he had just thought when there was a light knock at his window, causing Natsuno to start. Faint---and restrained, the sound of a fingertip tapping.

He did not fear terror. He came, was all he thought. That said, of course he didn't plan to answer the knock nor to open the window. Natsuno peered towards the curtain, remaining sitting stiffly on his bed. If he continued to ignore it, what would the enemy try next, he wondered absently.

The seconds passed with the sound of the knocking coming many times, continuing insistently. When he continued to ignore it, there was the sound of someone trying to open the window from the outside. The window shook a few times lightly, confirming that it wouldn't open, then the noise stopped. Footsteps clearly trying to sneak about left the window.

Natsuno breathed a light sigh. And then this time he listened for sounds within the house. Was there no sound of the backdoor opening, were there no footsteps in the hallway? Without ever hearing those sounds, again the sounds of footsteps sneaking to the window returned. There was a hesitant knock on the window glass. ---And then the sound of footsteps again. They were leaving the yard, and this time he could hear the back door opening. He didn't actually hear the sound of the door opening but somewhere a door was opening, but there was definitely the sound of the furniture and the walls wavering with the air that flowed in with the open door.

Listening with everything he had, Natsuno tried to sound out where that presence was in the house. Being an older house it creaked considerably. The halls were no exception but he couldn't hear any footsteps coming down the hallway. Instead he heard footsteps coming to the rear yard again. ---Whatever the case, it seemed like they didn't have the gall to try sneaking in through the back door.

Again the knock came. Natsuno kept his back against the wall, keeping his breath down and ignoring it. And then a voice came. Natsuno stepped away from the wall. It was very low, a hushed voice, calling 'Natsuno.' He couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl's voice. Whispering, as if to conceal themselves, but it could clearly be heard if one listened for it.

---Natsuno.

The quiet voice came from outside the window. For a moment Natsuno thought that it was Tamotsu. It felt like somebody he was close with calling his name. And nobody came to mind who called his name that way aside from Tamotsu.

Natsuno eventually got out of the bed. Maybe sensing that Natsuno had stood up, the quiet knocking ceased.

"....Who's there?" he asked lowly, a voice answering, stiffled, it's me. That voice definitely had a familiarity to it. It wasn't someone he'd just known by seeing a few times, it was somebody Natsuno knew well.

Natsuno opened the curtain. The window's glass was like a dark mirror. The lamp's light reflected the low lit room. And in the vague double exposure of the image, he could see the darkness outside. The grove of trees that lined up until just near the wall.

Somewhat white appeared within his vision. That was unmistakably a man's hand, knocking beneath the glass. Somebody was bent down beneath the glass. When he pressed his forehead to the glass and looked down, indeed he could see a part of a person's body.

Natsuno tightened his grip on the cross in his hand. With the enemy crouched down beneath the window, he didn't have any plans of letting go of it. If they knew him, why were they hiding? If it were really Tamotsu, he'd be standing up right away and hurrying him to open up, right? Something uneasy stirred in his chest. Something was lodged in his throat, feeling like it would stop him up and silence him, something he couldn't give voice to. Some thought, gloomy and dark was hazily coiling up, taking form.

The knocking hand. A very normal hand, one that would probably feel warm and tender if touched. One finger reached up and tapped the glass.

"...I said who is it?"

It's me, said the muffled voice. Natsuno at last reached out his hand and undid the crescent lock. There was a whispering in his chest saying he mustn't do that. At the same time, he realized he was making a grave mistake. Standing there alone, protecting himself, wasn't he forgetting something that was too important to be forgotten? Something that he could almost but not quite see. If he opened that window, he had a hunch it would be solidified, that 'something.'

With a click the lock was undone. At the same time the the hand drew back. Whoever was outside wasn't standing up. With the hand not holding the cross, Natsuno opened the window.

Just as he put his hand on the window's edge, about to call out to ask who it was his wrist was grabbed. The one who was outside of the window in a struggle between the power to pull that hand off and the power to pull Natsuno out was half standing, and then released Natsuno's hand in order to cover their face with both arms.

For an instant, Natsuno was stupefied.

The one outside of the window turned their face away and with no concern for their appearance fled the backyard.

His wrist had been grabbed. That touch was like ice. In that instant before he covered his face, the lamp's light caught that face.

"......Tohru-chan....."

Reflexively, Natsuno turned his body away. Taking the plank from the door, he left the room. Running down the hall to the back door, it was faintly opened. He stepped into the shoes there and flew out into the back yard.

Outside was teeming with the sound of the wind and the stillness of the night. A dense night dyed in darkness.

He followed in the direction the fleeing figure had run in. That was it, he thought.

Death was spreading. Death came to those touched by the Oni, and then they rose. If it was them who took Tohru away, then of course it wasn't impossible for Tohru to be reborn too. Natsuno had been trying to remember that. ---No, he was trying not to remember it.

He didn't want to think that. He didn't want to believe it. It was fine if it were Megumi or anybody else at all but Tohru was the one it absolutely couldn't have been.

Taking off running towards the front of the house, he came to the road with no signs of people there. There was a light on in front of the entryway shining over the various shrubs showing only the front garden and low hedges. At the same level on the low fence gate was a faint opening, now wavering.

He pulled it open, stepping out onto the road and looking left and right. The road was dark, barely lit at all by the street lamps, disappearing into the inky darkness in both directions. There was no sign of anybody where his eyes could see, nor could he hear any footsteps. All that resounded was the wind and the sounds of the trees swayed by the night breeze.

Natsuno looked back and forth countless times until his shoulders and his breath could settle. Discouraged by seeing no signs of anything, he took a breath.

---Tohru was.

The death spreading through the village had had to be stopped, normalcy had had to be restored. While he had known that it would be a difficult, puzzling matter, he had been certain that it could be done. He hadn't yet been able to see how to even start, but somehow if even one opening was found it could have been done. While Natsuno once felt that, at the exact moment he felt it was absolutely impossible.

Nobody could stop this. Right now they had advanced to the

point of no return. He couldn't explain why he thought that but as the sensation in his hands returned, it was confirmed.

(.....What should I do?)

What should he do? What should he do, how should he be? Something like impatience rose up. It paired together splendidly with his despair.

Feeling despondent, Natsuno turned back. Closing the gates, coming near the entryway, he remembered that he himself had been the one to lock it. Lamenting how foolish an act it had been, he headed to the back yard with a sigh. At least it seemed he'd done this much without waking his parents.

Discouraged and rebuking himself, Natsuno went back around to the back yard, not noticing the figure hiding in the trees behind him. Nor did he notice as they soundlessly snuck out from them, nor did he notice as both of their hands reached out to him.

The collar of his pajamas was nabbed and he was pulled down. Although the figure supporting his back from behind and stopping his movements seemed gentle, the arms wrapped around him to restrain him, the hand over his mouth, the face he caught a peek of were cold enough to be felt piercing into his very core.

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Cultural Notes

5-1
Shinzan Shiki - The Mountain Passing Ceremony
Seishin could not yet fulfill all of the duties of the head monk. In practical matters, Seishin was the head monk but Seishin had yet no wife nor child. Far from it, they hadn't had the ceremony for his transfer to the position, so he had yet to truly inherit the temple.

The ceremony being referred to is one in which a new head monk takes over a temple. Shinzan means to pass over or cross a mountain and many temples have an honorary sangou prefix appended to their name (see

notes from chapter 9-1

about posthumous names and Ingou). Much like an Ingou is the use of the character 'in' (院) for temple, certain temples themselves often have the name of the mountain it's nearest with the character 'san' (山) for mountain attached to their names. The Mountain Passing Ceremony is about the new head priest advancing onwards to the mountain. In many temples that don't have a mountainous prefix, the ceremony may just be called the nyuuin shiki or the entrance to the temple ceremony.

5-3
Burying with blades
"But they're set with blades and juzu in hand. In both Nao-san and Shuuji-san's coffin, there were protective blades and juzu in with them. It's doubtful they have an effect."

In some Japanese funerals, the dead are set with juzu beads just as some Catholics may be buried holding rosaries. They may also be set with knives in order to ward off (or fight off) evil spirits.

5-6
Kotatsu

- A table with a heater beneath it and a futon or blanket over the top of it to keep the heat in. Often another table plank is placed over the blanket to serve as a hard table top for writing, eating, or whatever other typical uses one may have for a table. In the olden days it was often set over a charcoal pit though in the modern era an electric heater is generally attached to the table itself. It's cheaper than heating the entire home. A

diagram

of two types of kotatsu, new and old, from Wikimedia Commons.

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Chapter 6

1

October 12th. Itou Ikumi was quickly advancing along the village road to the north. Past the area of Sotoba, entering into Kami-Sotoba, just at the boundary was the Shimizu Gardening Shop. While it was a shop, there was no storefront. It was merely a field spread out behind the house that one couldn't discern as a shop if not for the modest signboard. That signboard was currently decorated with a flower wreath. Beneath the floral wreath was a black and white striped curtain, the front of the house was decorated in white and black and a mourning paper lantern and paper decorations were set out. It was Shimizu Yuu's funeral.

Ikumi pushed her way through the crowds of people entering into the house and found the house to be ripe with the smell of incense and an unease that fell over it.

"Even though he was still just in high school....."

"Even though his father had just died recently....."

"I wonder what Yumi-san'll do now? It's just her and a grandpa she doesn't have any blood ties to."

"She'll go back to her own family, won't she?"

"Even so, I don't see any of her family here."

"Or any classmates either."

The old women looked out dubiously over the tatami room, closing their mouths quickly when they laid eyes on Ikumi. Ikumi

turned aside their suspicious stares and stepped into the room, going straight to the altar. Sitting beside the coffin set up at the altar, the mother Yumi and the grandfather Masaji sat, despondent.

"My deepest condolences," Ikumi said as she came before the two. Shimizu Masaji raised his face doubtfully. He looked up at Ikumi, blinking in surprise. He looked as if he was searching his memory for who she was and where she was from.

"I'm called Itou. I heard you lost your grandson, and I couldn't keep myself from rushing over."

"Ah... Thank you for that."

"Even though he was still just a high school student they say, it really is a shame, isn't it?" Ikumi said, to which Masaji hung his face low, nodding. Yumi who was seated next to him looked up at Ikumi absently.

"It seems you lost your son this summer too, didn't you? Ryuuji-san, was it?"

"Yes....."

As the the man looked even more depressed, Ikumi gave him a nod. "Ryuji-san took his son along with him, didn't he?"

"That might be the case."

"Shimizu-san, I am saying that literally. Ryuji-san rose up and pulled him in. He's an Oni."

At that, Masaji blinked.

"Ryuji-san wasn't sent off. I think that his burial was done wrong. Monks these days can't do anything but count costs. They can't comfort and send off the dead right at all. The way the service was held was wrong. He had worries and regrets left over. So Ryuuji-san wasn't sent on. So he rose up and pulled your grandson with him."

"You--what are you talking about?"

"You heard me. Don't you get it? There's no point to a funeral like this. These monks lately don't know a darned thing. It's because you relied on the temple that Ryuji-san didn't pass on. If you don't do the mourning service over again right, Masaji-san and Yumi-san, you'll end up pulled off too."

Masaji's face went red. With his fists clenched, he half rose. "And just who are you? What did you come to do?"

"I came to warn you. Your relatives? They rose up. They're Oni."

"That's preposterous."

"If that's not it, why are these deaths continuing."

Masaji was at a loss for words.

"Ryuuji-san just died, and now it's your grandson. How can something like this happen? It's obviously because Ryuuji-san pulledhim along. If you'd done a proper mourning ceremony, there's no way Ryuuji-san would have risen up. In other words,"

"Leave!" Masaji shouted, to Ikumi's disappointment.

"----I see. I came out of kindness but it seems you people can't understand the principal at hand here at all."

Ikumi looked coldly at Masaji, her gaze shifting to Yumi who looked up at her in a daze.

"Madame, what about you? It's no use going back to your own home. Ryuuji-san'll follow you. You might just be next. If you're going to have a change of heart, now's the time."

"Now hold on, you."

Her arm was grabbed from behind. When she turned around, the Murasako rice shop's Munehide was glaring at her.

"Listen here, that's not something to say to people who've just suffered a tragedy. Enough of this nonsense."

Ikumi set her sights then on Munehide.

"Come to think of it, there've been deaths going on at your place too, haven't there?"

Munehide flinched. After his grandson Hiromi, his youngest child Masao had died. It was literally a succession of sorrows.

"If you don't do something about that stubbornness of yours, they'll just keep continuing one after another."

"That's preposterous," Munehide spit out, but his grand daughter left behind came to mind. At any rate, he pulled at the arm he had seized, pulling Ikumi from the tatami room. "This is a place for grieving the dead. Think of the time and the place, would you?"

Putting her out forcibly he closed the shouji but whether that would really keep her out or not, Munehide himself had his doubts.

With a hmph, Kiumi stared at the closed shouji. Obstinate bunch who just didn't understand. If that was how it was then fine. They'd come to know who was right, and they'd pay in flesh. As she turned around, an audience with brimming curiosity surrounded Ikumi.

"The ame to you all, you'd better watch out."

With just that, Ikumi went towards the front. Behindher a short old lady followed.

"You weren't really serious about what you said in there, right?"

Ikumi came to a stop. Behind the old woman, trailing by a few steps, a number of old people were following after. Half of it was a matter of burning curiosity, and yet they did have unease on their faces.

"If I wasn't serious, I wouldn't take the trouble of walking out here. Though, nobody's going to believe me it looks like, yes?"

"That's because you... I mean, Oni, you're saying."

"Then let me ask you, what else would you call it?"

The old woman averted her gaze.

"Since this summer, just how many people have died, do you even know? Try hard to remember, now! How many times has the mourning group been set out? How many times now have funeral processions set out? And how many times more have you heard stories that so-and-so has died? Without seeing their funeral."

The elderly were silent.

"That the deaths will continue like this is a given! If this is going to be normal, it's you all who something's most likely to come down upon."

"That's.... Still."

"This family's no different. The father died, and while the forty-ninth day did or didn't quite come yet his son dies. And in the family the funeral manager was from, before even the seventh day anniversary of the grandson's death, the son dies. Things like this are happening far too frequently now don't you think?"

Still, many of the elderly had mumbled but there were non among them clearly offering any objection.

"They're being pulled along. It's Oni. This and that, it's all happened after Kanemasa brought that strange house."

As if on cue, the elderly looked up towards the Western mountain. With the clear fall air as the backdrop, the mountain glistened a deep, cool green.

"But... That's one thing and this is..."

"Do you think they're unrelated? Until now the village has been constantly dead folk and funerals. And yet to this point nobody's risen back up. It's that bunch that's taking them in. They were originally Oni after all. If not, why would they have such a gate, closed up to hide behind?" Ikumi lorded over the elderly who lowered their eyes. "If you don't want to believe, then don't. The deaths in your families will come directly to you in time, and you'll know the truth whether you want to or not. Though when it gets to

that point, I don't know what I'll be able to do for you anymore."

Turning around, her head held high and haughty, the elderly watched Ikumi depart in bewilderment. As for the inconsistancies and contraditions in what Ikumi said, there were none amongst them pointing them out. Even if they could, they probably wouldn't. This was out of the domain of common sense, a matter of intuition. --This village was clearly strange lately.

The elderly shook their heads and returned to the funeral but amongst them a number of them would ask around about who had just came. Those who asked kept the name Itou Ikumi from Mizuguchi in their minds. Like a charm to protect them.

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As soon as Akira returned home from school he changed clothes and went to the mountains. Hurrying straight for the forest road, he went towards the Hashimoto family gravesite. It took guts to set foot in the graveyard but the skies were still lit. All the same, somewhere in the mountains was the quiet sound of a motor. The sounds of someone working.
With all of those factors in his favor, Akira stepped into the graveyard. Motohashi Tsuruko's grave was just as Natsuno said, put back together as if nothing had happened.
"The sotoba front and the stone too...." While looking at the surroundings, Akira went around the sotoba frontpiece. Looking at the stones and ground around it, there were three white rocks, drawing out a thirty centimeter triangle. If that was still in place, then... But.
"Nii-chan is cool." Even though he was alone, he wanted to say it. Just with the placement of some pebbles, he'd made a surveilance system, which was amazing. If somebody did--if they came to dig up the grave, they wouldn't notice something like such little rocks, right?
"He is the guy Kaori owes her life too and all."
He saved Kaori when she was attacked. At that time, Akira was completely cowed and couldn't move. If Natsuno weren't there, surely he would have been the one attacked next.
As he thought, he left the graveyard with the sense of having handled a big responsibility. He flew down the slope of the mountain as if something were pushing him from behind. All he did was go to the graveyard and confirm the state of the grave, a trivial thing, but this was a big deal, Akira triumphantly convinced himself. It was surveillance, a very important thing!
Natsuno went to the high school in Mizobe, so at most he could get back just before the sun fell. If the sun set at about five thirty, you could even say he couldn't be back by then. So when Akira himself said that he'd go out and do surveillance, Natsuno said "I'll leave it

to you." Being reminded to careful enough, stopping once the sun set and giving up for the day, without wasting any time after confirming it and leaving the mountains, made it feel good, like he was assigned to something all the more important, so to be told "I'm counting on you" on top of that was even better. He was useful to Natsuno he thought, which somehow or another left him feeling proud.
Saying that nothing was out of order today, Akira returned home brimming with a sense of achievement. Kaori has just changed into her normal clothes and stepped outside.
"Welcome home," Kaori said as Love came out of his dog house. "How was it?"
"Nothing out of order!" Akira said, slightly puffing his chest out.
Kaori looked around before asking. "....The grave?"
"Just like Nii-chan said, it's been put back. But the markers haven't been moved."
I see, Kaori said with a breath. With Love in tow she started towards the community center. Akira followed after that abit only to stop and turn around as he remembered, hurrying into the house and calling to their mother in the living room.
"I'm going out to walk Love with Kaori."
"You mean Onee-chan, don't you?" his mother said, giving her usual petty complaint. "Be sure to be back by dinner."
"I know, I get it."
"You don't get it at all," she said with an audible grimace, to which Akira mentally stuck his tongue out at her. She was the one who didn't get it. How could those things known as moms be so insensitive an carefree? They acted like something was no big deal and then got in the way of those thing. Akira sometimes had to wonder if his mother didn't understand that there was an order to things.
"We'll be back by dinner. ---If someone comes in while I'm out, don't let them in."
"I heard you this morning. Tell them you're out and to come again, you said?" his mother Sachiko said, leading into a topic as she folded the newspaper open to the TV listings. "Akira, did you get into a fight with somebody?"
"That ain't it." Turning to leave, Akira mumbled to himself 'But I guess you could say that.' If she was asking about a fight, it might just have come down to one. It was true that Akira and the others

had an enemy.
Hurrying back to the road, Kaori and Love were waiting. As Akira hurried to catch up, the two turned together towards the community center.
"What's wrong?"
"I told Mom what to do again."
"That's dumb," Kaori said sounding frustrated. "If you push it too many times, Mom's going to think it's weird isn't she?"
"If we don't keep pushing it, she'll forget right away. She thinks bringing in the laundry or throwing out buckets of old water are m ore important than anything we have to say."
That might be true, Kaori nodded.
"Nii-chan went through the trouble of calling to tell us, so it's gotta be majorly important. So I'm gonna keep pushing it."
"Yuuki-san..." Kaori murmured. "I wonder why he did go through the trouble of calling to tell us that?"
"He just remembered it, right?" Akira said but he wasn't really sure himself. Something was off about Natsuno. Or at least Akira got a weird feeling from him.
"He asked if we had any visitors, didn't he?"
"Yup."
"Does that mean that somebody came to Yuuki-san's house then, I wonder?"
Might be, Akira said looking to Kaori. "But that's something we'll know when we ask him."
Kaori agreed to that with a nod. That was certainly true but. --What was this? This vague premonition that wouldn't let her settle?
With Love in tow they went around to the community center. There were a few kids with a soccer ball just coming off of the grounds. After that the area was calm and quiet.
Lately, you don't see many people, Kaori thought. Normally at this time she would catch sight of some kid or another playing alone at the corner of the lot playing with a ball but lately she didn't see much along those lines. While kids used to be around until the sun set, as long as they could see the ball, but not anymore. Come to think of it, maybe it was because their mothers had told them to come back around that time for dinner. It wasn't the case for Kaori, but Akira almost always seemed to be late for dinner.
Lately it was lonely in the village. Especially in the evenings. Thinking that as she sat down on the bench on the corner of the

grounds, the lot seemed impossibly wide with only herself and Akira there, leaving her feeling even more forlorn.
Taking off Love's leash, he went around the empty lot freely the same as yesterday. Picking up smells here and there, as if he were searching for something.
Natsuno came just as it was on the brink of getting dark. Walking with a dispirited gait, Natsuno put his bad down on the bench as if it were all very tiring.
"Nii-chan, the stones weren't moved." Akira reported triumphantly.
Natsuno only said 'that so' sitting down on the bench as if exhausted.
"Yuuki-san, what's wrong?"
"......Not enough sleep." That's what Natsuno said but he seemed like he had more problems than being tired.
"Yesterday, did something happen?"
As Kaori's question, Natsuno suddenly looked up. "Like what?"
"I mean, you suddenly called Akira, didn't you?"
"I pushed my mom on it like you said." Akira said again proudly, earning a glare from Kaori.
"You be quiet. --Nee, why did you call us like that? Yesterday, did something happen?"
Natsuno couldn't answer. Resting his elbows on his knees, he stared fixedly at the ground. In the twilight, Natsuno's expression was obscured.
"....Just some stuff." Natsuno finally answered, looking up at Kaori.
"Hey, did Shimizu--" he started to say, only to immediately look down. "No, ... It's fine. It's nothing."
"What is it?"
Natsuno shook his head. He gave a faint, dry smile. "Akira, anyway, be careful. It'd be better not to go out at night. If you do have to go out at night, bring something to protect yourself."
"Like a bat?"
"Even that's better than nothing. Or like a cross or a charm. I dunno how much good it'll do, though."
Got it, Akira agreed meekly.
"So, did you decide what we're gonna do?"
After being asked that, Natsuno gave another strange pause.
"...There's nothing we can do is there? Until the weekend."
"We're not doing anything until the weekend?"
"It's more like we can't, isn't it? By the time I get back from school

there's not much time left before sunset."
"That's true enough. Will that work? Being that leisurely about this."
"There's no choice is what I'm saying. Anyway, we'll be watching the grave---and keeping note if anyone else dies. That said more than 'if' here lately it's about who from where exactly that died."
"Hey. I was thinking, like. How about we try telling Megumi's dad and mom that Megumi's not there, what do you think?"
"I thought of that too. But, how are we supposed to say it? Are we just gonna say straight forwardly that when we tried digging up the grave there was nobody in it?"
"Mmmm... There's that, too."
"Could we write an anonymous letter, I wonder?" Kaori tilted her head. "There's nobody in the grave, we'll write into a letter and drop into their mailbox."
Akira looked at Kaori in annoyance. "Something like that'll just be seen as a prank, isn't that obvious?"
"That's true, but.... But, if they keep coming, it might strike a chord, right?"
"It might, I guess."
"We'll do it until it does."
"That'll take a while. It seems like it'd take long enough that they'd find out we were sending them before they did anything else."
That's true too, Kaori said with a sigh.
"We're limited to how much we can do with just us. Especially since like Yuuki-san said, we're at school. If the adults don't do something, I don't think anything will help. We have to get them thinking that something's wrong."
Kaori looked to Natsuno for agreement but Natsuno was slouched with his head hung.
"......What's wrong?"
"Nii-chan, what's up?"
"......I didn't get enough sleep, I told you that," he said without raising his head, voice cracking.
"You all right?" Akira asked, to which he nodded. He lifted his face.
"Sorry. I'm going home for today," he said, standing up, taking a step as if seized with dizziness from rising.
"Nii-chan, you all right?"
Kaori called for Love. "Come here, Love. ---Akira, let's take Yuuki-san home. He's tired."
"No.... I'm all right."

"No you're not. Nii-chan, you're in a cold sweat. Let's go, Kaori." Akira said, taking Natsuno's bag. Kaori put the leash back on Love's collar and moved to the front.
Yuuki heard a girl's voice calling out 'excuse me' as if a repeat of last night. Wonderinf if it was the same thing again, Azusa in the kitchen turned and made an uneasy face.
Stopping Azusa from going towards the entryway, Yuuki went himself. Opening the door, it wasn't the girl from yesterday but a girl about fifteen or so standing there gasping for breath.
"Uhm, are you Yuuki-san's father?"
Yuuki nodded, even while having an unpleasant feeling. It wasn't that the girl before him was unpleasant. It was because it was like a trace copy of exactly what he remembered happening yesterday.
"Yuuki-san, ---Uhm, he's over there. Please come with me."
The girl looked distressed. But all the same, Yuuki still harbored that unpleasantness.
"Who are you?"
"I am called Tanaka. Uhm, Yuuki---No, I'm an acquaintance of Natsuno-san's."
"I've never heard of you."
The girl seemed hurt by his tone for a moment but she immediately pointed behind herself. "Yuuki-san can't move. Anyway, please come with me."
Yuuki furrowed his brows. The girl went ahead of him opening the gate, gesturing across the road. Distrustful as he followed her, he could see a form crouching across the road, and a young boy crouching over him with a dog.
Thinking that it was true with surprise, Yuuki hurried out. The young boy raised his face in a daze.
"---What happened?"
"Nii-chan seemed sick, so we were walking him home but this was as far as we could get.
Yuuki reached for his son's arm as if to pull him up, but Natsuno pulled back as if against it.
"What happened? Are you okay?"
"..... I'm dizzy ....."
Anyways, stand up, Yuuki urged sliding his shoulder under his son's arm. The girl took Natsuno's bag and the dog while the young boy supported Natsuno from the other side. As they returned to the entryway, Azusa was standing petrified.

"What's wrong?"
"I don't know. ---Is it anemia?" Yuuki asked as he settled his son onto the entryway step, when he suddenly had a secret start. No, he thought. Shimizu and Mutou's faces flashed through his mind.
Azusa took off his shoes. Yuuki tried to support his son again when Natsuno waved his hand.
"I'm all right. I can walk on my own."
Ignoring that, he took his arm. Stopping Azusa with a glance, for the time being he took him to his room. Taking him to the bed, Natsuno collapsed onto it by himself.
"Are you all right?"
".....I'm fine. .....I'm beat."
"Do you hurt anywhere?"
Yuuki peered at his son's face. His already pale face was now clearly lacking in complexion.
"I just got vertigo. I'd been feeling a little bad since last week?"
"Since last week?"
Yuuki nodded meekly.
"Let's have the doctor of the Ozaki's come over."
"I don't think it's that big of a deal, though," Natsuno said, sounding as if his breathined had picked up, even while calm. "Like, I can't get to sleep lately."
Yuuki stared attentively at that wryly smiling face. How did Doctor Ozaki put it? Anemia, and then dulled emotions. Like it was hard to communicate. Almost like another person. ---Weren't those what he said the major characteristics were?
"I feel bad but I can't get any rest. ... I guess I'm beat after all, with this and that."
"This and that?"
"Yeah. ... Tohru-chan, or the Murasako's Masao. If I try to rest, I just keep thinking of those kinds of things. I think I might be in bad shape myself, too, but."
Yuuki let out a breath. At least he wasn't seeing any strange behavior like what Toshio had been saying. He did look like he was feeling sick but it was clearly different from *that*.
Definitely---Yuuki thought. Lately, Natsuno had been strange. This morning, when he woke up, everything in the house was closed and locked up, and Natsuno himself had said he'd been the one to do it.
It wasn't impossible, he thought. Natsuno was at that age, and it was the first time someone he'd really known had died. And even

worse was it was continuing, people his own age dying off. It'd be more strange if that didn't have an affect on him, and it must have been affecting him more than Yuuki or Natsuno himself had been aware of.
"..... You all right?"
"Yeah. I'll try hard to sleep."
"Wouldn't it be better to be seen by a doctor?"
"If I can't sleep tonight either, I'll see one. If I do, he'll give me some kinda of medicine. But Dad's White Horse'd work too," he said with a smile, and so Yuuki smiled too.
"Don't get ahead of yourself."
Turning out the light and leaving the room, he saw Azusa trying to peer into the room with a worried face.
".....How is he?"
"Seems he hasn't been able to sleep. He seemed like he was fine but what happened with Tohru-kun must have been a shock.
".....My," Azusa murmured, then nodded. "That's true. They were such good friends."
"Aa. Doesn't seem like we'll need to worry. He said so himself that if he can't sleep tonight either he'll go to a doctor."
I see, Azusa said with a relieved seeming breath. When the two returned downstairs, the two children in the entryway were standing with worried faces in the entryway. They couldn't see the dog tied up outside. His voice was faintly fawning.
"I'm sorry about that. Thank you."
"How is Yuuki-san?"
"Seems like he's not getting enough sleep. .....Anyway, come inside."
At Yuuki's words the two looked to eachother, then nodded lightly and stepped in.
"Let's see, Tanaka-san, you said it was?"
"Yes. I am Tanaka Kaori. This is my little brother Akira."
"Are you Natsuno's classmate?"
"No. I'm a grade beneath. Uhm, Megumi was---a girl named Shimizu Megumi was his classmate. I'm her childhood friend."
Aa, Yuuki murmured.
"Do you know Shimizu-san?"
"Yes. My mom and Megumi's mom are friends. My house is near her's too, and we're one year apart, so I was good friends with Megumi, but."

"I see..... It's too bad about Megumi-chan."
Yes, the girl nodded, hanging her head.
"I'm sorry for the trouble, but thank you. You saved him."
The two returned after having tea. In a few words, the two had said that they were walking their dog when they'd met with Natsuno, and when talking to him he'd seemed sick so they'd tried to help him home when on the way Natsuno crumpled over, they'd said. Kaori's demeanor seemed familiar with him, and Akira's even more so. Yuuki showed considerable surprised at hearing him called "Nii-chan." Natsuno wasn't fitting in with the village but somewhere along the time he'd ended up with regional bonds, finding a place to belong, Yuuki thought.
Leaving the entryway of Natsuno's house, Akira let out a heavy sigh. Kaori likewise let out one. Even though he was so cheeky, Akira was shy around strangers. Especially in regards to adults. That was why Kaori had to be the one to engage in the pleasantries, and it was extremely tiring.
Taking up Love's leash, they started towards the house.
"Naa... Kaori," Akira started in with a quiet voice, his eyes cast down. "Do you think Nii-chan's all right?"
"Didn't even his father say that he would be all right?"
"That's right. ...Said he wasn't sleeping."
"He said that before too when we met him. He said that he'd lost somebody close to him. If that's the case it's only natural, isn't it? When Megumi died, I couldn't sleep for a while either."
"Mm."
"But... in this village, lately, there might not be anybody who hasn't lost somebody close to them," Kaori said, thinking once again that this situation really wasn't normal. Why wouldn't any of the adults call it out as strange, Kaori thought, finding it mysterious. "Yuuki-san's father doesn't know but... there's also what's going on with Megumi, with that man, a lot of things are happening....." Kaori remembered Natsuno's pale face.
"..... Is that all it is?" Akira asked, making Kaori tilt her head.
"Is that all?"
"Why did Nii-chan make that phone call yesterday? Asking if there were any visitors, like. You said it yourself. Wouldn't that mean there was a visitor at Nii-chan's place?"
"Ah..... Yeah."
"Megumi might've come again, don'tcha think?"

Kaori's eyes widened. "..... Stop it."
"Nii-chan's condition might be because of them, huh? Megumi or---that guy who got hit at the grave--somebody."
"Stop it!"
Akira looked up. "I saw it. While you were going to get Nii-chan's dad."
"Saw what?"
"His neck. ---Right around here," Akira said, pointing to the base of his own neck. "When Nii-chan was crouching over, I saw it. You've been bitten by bugs in the summer and gotten swollen marks, right? There were two of those there."
Kaori stood stiff upright. "..... No way."
"I think someone came for revenge. That's why Nii-chan called us. To warn us. ---Kaori, what'll we do?"
Kaori tightly gripped the lease. Even if he asked her that, of course Kaori didn't know what to do.

sinnesspiel

3

Toshio looked up to the clock in his own room. Even though it was past ten at night he hadn't heard from Seishin. Yesterday he'd left just saying to let him think and that had been the end of it. What's there left to think about at this point, Toshio thought with irritation. What was happening in the village was now obvious. At least for the time being only Toshio and Seishin were aware of the true state of things, and if they didn't do something then how did he think this calamity was going to be stopped? That afternoon, Tamo Hiroya from Monzen had come by. Tamo Safafumi's grandson, he was still in high school. He had that. While time was passing like this the disaster was steadily spreading.

If the village's distress wasn't his problem, if he was going to say he didn't care who died then he could do what he wanted, but it wasn't that, it was the fact that while saying he wanted to save it, when it came time to do it he was seized with fear and drew back that was so annoying. He got that there might be some emotional resistance but this was a problem with only two choices.

Toshio glared at the clock countless times, thinking more and more that he should call it quits for the day. Weariness clung to him like another skin. His arms, his legs, his entire body was in pain. Since that summer he'd been at this day and night. Thinking that he might be forgiven for at least taking a rest today might have been because of Seishin's attitude bringing him down, and then again it might have been discouragement at not having a plan of what to do from here on.

All there was was the feeling he had to do something. But that didn't mean he knew what he should do. Anyway for the time being what Toshio could do was dig up the grave of the victim who came after Shuuji--Megumi's grave, but what would come of it if he did,

he thought. Moreover there was Setsuko, he thought. If he didn't put up some kind of dam then the damage would keep spreading. To make sure Setsuko wouldn't rise up, he'd put a stake in her in advance. But even thinking that, up until now they were all patients he'd had a connection with--even if only as corpses--and when thinking of pounding a stake into them, even Toshio hesitate. He couldn't escape the feeling of wanting to put it off every little bit that he could.

(Why do they rise up.....)

If he knew that, then he might be able to find a plan to stop them beyond stakes. Be it poison or something else. If it could be something injected, how great would that be, he thought. Even if it wasn't an injection, if it was something Toshio could do in secret during the autopsy. ---But a stake wouldn't work. In the village it was still close relatives that washed the body for burial. Even without that, they wore the white burial clothes. If the corpse were injured there would definitely be signs of it.

(Anyway, Megumi-chan ... Or should it be Setsuko-san.....)

Toshio pulled the curtains and looked outside of the window. It was already dark. He didn't think that he'd catch sight of them that easy but he did think that going out alone was dangerous.

With a single breath exhaled, Toshio rose. Anyway, for the time being he'd at least check out Setsuko's grave. He didn't want to go out, he wanted to rest, it was a compelling desire, but his impatience wouldn't allow it.

Putting on his blouson and leaving his room, he went towards the hospital. If he was going for a night walk, he'd need to close up the hospital waiting room. When leaving the hallway, he heard Takae's voice behind him.

"You're going out?"

Toshio nodded vaguely.

"These days you're going out every day. Just where are you

going?"

"Well, just out."

"It doesn't look like you're going on a house call."

Yeah, was all he said with another still vague answer. Takae pointed to the hallway with a stern expression.

"Now you come here."

"Sorry but," I'm in a hurry Toshio had tried to say but Takae sharply cut him off.

"Just do it, come here now. We are talking."

Clicking his tongue in his thoughts, he heard light footsteps coming down the stairway. Kyoko was just coming down from the bedroom. Was she sleeping? Her eyes looked dubiously at Toshio and Takae.

"Anyhow, Toshio, could I have you come for a bit?"

Reluctantly, Toshio nodded. As Kyouko gave him a questioning stare he followed after Takae into the tatami room. Within the tatami room was the nearby study that was Takae's room. Since before his dad had died, Takae had been staying in there.

"Now sit down," Takae said pointing to the low table. As Toshio hopelessly took a seat, Takae poured the hot water from the small tea pot while speaking coldly. "Where is it that you think you were going?"

"……The temple."

"And last night?"

"The temple. There're some meetings with the three pillars."

"You are telling lies. Last night there was a telephone call from Tamo-san, I'll have you know."

Toshio clicked his tongue. Takae thrust the cup out at him as if blaming him.

"You aren't by chance busying yourself in the village, I hope?"

"Mom." Toshio closed his mouth, dumbfounded. 'Busying yourself in the village' was a code word for Takae. She was asking if he wasn't keeping himself busy with a woman from the village. Don't ask how he knew. That seemed to be the only thing it could mean from Takae. In fact it'd been something he'd been asked since high school, to his frustration.

"That's not what it is. I really have business with Seishin. We haven't called Tamo-san yet but lately it's come to the point where the three pillars might have to have a meeting."

I wonder about that, Takae murmured in a low voice. "I heard this from that very Tamo-san, but they've managed to open a clinic in Shimo-Sotoba, haven't they? You, did you even know that?"

Ah that, Toshio said with a sigh. "Well, yeah."

"Has the doctor of the Kanemasa's come to speak with you?"

"Nah. But it's just a matter of time, I'm sure."

"And what do you intend to say to him?"

"What---? I don't have the right to stop him."

"Has he contacted the Medical Association?"

"I haven't heard from them in a while so I don't know."

His father interacted zealously with other medical professionals and had quite a few contacts within the Medical Association, but Toshio wasn't fond of wasting his time like that. Toshio had always been outside of the network made by the regional physicians. He had just loose enough a connection that they would take his patients and he was on good terms with other doctors from the same college, but none of them were setting up business in his area.

"Do you intend to give your implicit consent? There's no need for two doctors in this village. And on top of everything, to open a clinic without so much as a word to you, it's an atrocity. If you don't convey the situation to them thoroughly, then."

"Like I said," Toshio said with a sigh. "It isn't something I've got the right to say anything about."

"This is no laughing matter. You absolutely must say something about it! Just what are you thinking? Going into practice even while the Ozakis are here. Why, it's no different than saying Ozaki is not sufficient!"

"Even if they are I don't care. To be honest, we're not enough. The business is just overflowing. If Ebuchi-san wants to open shop, it's actually even helpful."

Saying that, Toshio felt a clench inside of himself. The Kirishiki household was quite possibly a den of Shiki. Didn't that mean that Ebuchi would be one of their allies? Ebuchi himself might have been another one to have risen. If that were the case then what could Ebuchi be thinking, opening shop?

Patients who went there, regardless of what the cause behind the symptoms they were seeking treatment for was, would probably come out with white faces and vacant eyes. ---There was no doubt it'd come to that. Or did they have another goal in mind for that?

Takae was running her mouth about something, but Toshio was no longer listening.

They moved in. --They invaded. Since then they'd always been closed up in that mansion, keeping their silence. This was their first move. What could it mean?

Toshio had only thought that they'd simply come to the village. But that was strange, wasn't it? Why did they come to this village, what were they thinking when they did? To go so far as to rebuild that mansion in order to move here, there had to be a goal behind it. Ebuchi opening shop may have been one part of that plan. If that was the case, what role would Ebuchi be trying to carry out from

here on?

"Toshio! Are you listening?"

He replied absently to Takae's scolding. He wanted to ask Seishin what he thought but at this rate he wouldn't be going out tonight. He felt strangely impatient. The increasing number of victims--of dead. It was possible that there was something beyond that that Toshio and the others had to fear. Something they had to take measures even one step sooner to put any kind of stop to it that they could.

sinnesspiel

4

Natsuno snuffed outhis breath in the night. The scent of dried grass hung overhead. Past the bows the raspberry plants with the dried leaves, he could see the faint, dim light in his own room.

Nights in a village within the mountains were cold. The feel of late autumn had slipped into the dead of night. Adjusting the collar of his parka, he clutched a momi fir stake at his chest. It had originally been a stake meant for use on Motohashi Tsuruko. Its initial mission still unfulfilled, now it was being held and warmed against Natsuno's chest.

He's snuck a stake and a wooden mallet from his father's workshop. An amateurishly made cross shape, that was Natsuno's only gain. Crouched in the clump of bushes, changing his position numerous times to keep his legs from going numb, he gazed into the night as it wore on.

He heard quiet footsteps in the garden when the hand on his wristwatch indicated that it was past two in the morning. The footsteps were clearly trying to sneak quietly, and the pitch black single figure neared the window that stood out with the light of the lamp. With their body leaned over, looking fixedly up at the window, it then stretched its arm out towards the window.

His eyes used to the dark, under even just the faintest light, he could make out the distinguishing features of that human shadow. For a while, Natsuno watched that familiar shadow with its arm stretched out, yet keepig its face down as it knocked on the window. A strangely deep emotion welled up in him.

When told of Tohru's death, when seeing Tohru in the Mutou household tatami room, he'd seen it all as something besides Tohru.

He was clearly just a shell, nothing more than an object. What Natsuno recognized as 'Tohru' was nowhere to be found within in. Even though it was obviously Tohru, "that" was not Tohru. --And then, what was right before his eyes then and there, while posessing a different quality than Tohru, was "Tohru" just as Natsuno remembered him.

How many times now hat Tohru knocked on the window. Natsuno, he heard a whispering voice call. Natsuno stood up.

".....I'm over here."

Tohru turned around as if shocked. It was entirely like the reaction of a human who had run into something terrifying. Natsuno tried to find his footing and retreat. The dried underbrush crunched beneath his feet. Tohru seemed to be paralyzed, not moving beneath the window. It was strange, the terrified face he had as he watched Natsuno retreat.

Trying even more to find his footing, he took two, three steps back. At last Tohru moved. With a somewhat resolved expression he rose up and started to take steps towards the woods. Natsuno thrust out what he'd been gripping in his pocket.

".....Does this work?"

For a moment, Tohru faltered at that. Natsuno didn't know if that was because it was a religious article or whether it was the natural response a human would have when having something strange thrust out at them. Natsuno drew back. Tohru hesitantly stepped forward. Natsuno quickened his pace. Tohru too quickened his. When the distance between them was growing closer he reached out his hand, then faltered with a clearly unpleasant expression. --- So it had an effect, even something like this. If nothing else it made the other feel unpleasant.

Natsuno bent half forward and started up the slope. When the distance between them seemed to be growing closer, once again he'd hold up the cross made of wood and crosswire. With that his opponent would falter and stop walking. Once again the distance opened. Repeating this each time, gradually his pace increased.

Ahead was a place where the trees faintly gave way to an opening, so Natsuno made a dash to get there at once. Hurrying to an opening too small to call a clearing, he flew into the trees at the opposite side and turned around. By now he was probably fairly far from the house. If nothing else, the sound wouldn't carry.

As Natsuno was leaning his back against a trunk and breathing hard with his shoulders, Tohru made an appearance in the opening.

"You're afraid of this thing?" Still catching his breath, he didn't seem at peace at all. Unable to calm his pounding pulse, his body should have been hot, but it was prickled with a cold sweat. His hand tucked into his coat gripped the splintering stake. The wooden mallet was tucked into his belt.

"It's just some wood bound together. But you're still scared of it?"

"..... Natsuno."

"Don't call me by that name, I told you!"

Tohru wore an even more complicated expression. ---He thought he did. All he could see was that it grew darker.

"So what do you feel when you look at this exactly? Or were you afraid of this since when you were alive too?"

"......Natsuno."

"Don't call me that I said!" He threw the cross at him. It missed his target, landing to Tohru's side. "Don't make a face like Tohru-chan. You're something else by now aren't you!"

Gripping the stake with both hands, his back felt weak. His hands chilled by the night trembled violently. Looking to where the cross had disappeared to, Tohru turned to look at Natsuno. He looked somewhat despondent as he looked towards Natsuno.

"......I." Tohru started to say, then closed his mouth. Instead he started towards him. Natsuno no longer had anything to stop him with.

"You... have you told anyone?"

"About what?"

"About me."

"I didn't tell."

I see, Tohru murmured.

"So you're gonna attack me after all?"

"......I'll be scolded." Tohru slowly went up the slope. "If I don't attack you, Aoi and the others'll be attacked. If I don't attack you and report back by dawn....."

"They're working you that hard, even in something like this?"

"......That's right. I don't have any choice. I'm one of their underlings."

Tohru stopped.

"It's because you poked your head into something off. Because you did something to anger them. The Takatoshi-san's from the Hirosawas, that was your doing, wasn't it?"

"Eh, was that who that was?"

Tohru nodded.

"It'd still be a problem if we were found out. But you went digging up graves didnt' you? Even if you'd noticed it, it would have been fine if you just cowered in your bed. If you'd seen Takatoshi-san, screamed and ran away, and hadn't kept watch on them. But you have an oddly reckless side to you." Tohru once again stepped closer. "It's find if they're noticed, for them. If it's by somebody who holes themselves up shivering in their rooms. But you have to try hunting them. Hunters won't do. .... We can't allow them."

Natsuno gripped the stake more tightly. Nothing was on the ground beneath himself and Tohru who came up the slope. One

more step. Then they'd be too close to sidestep.

"And? You're being well used as their underling. You, you're really not human anymore, are you?"

"......That's right."

"That's dirty.... Don't you think?" The stake in his hands. It could have been any other weapon. "You'll bite me and that'll be the end of it won't it? And I have to stab you with this."

Tohru stopped.

"How's about at least trying to be a little more like a vampire. That... you're just like when you were alive."

Both of Natsuno's hands remembered the feel in them when they'd struck Takatoshi. Going beyond reasoning on things like good or evil, it was engraved within him. If it were at least a gun. If it were something that could stop his enemy from breathing without him having to feel the sensation with his own hand. If it were something where he could just flick a switch without having to see his target.

"......This, there's no way I can stab you with it, is there?!"

Natsuno couldn't do it. Gripping a weapon in his own hand, killing somebody with it, he couldn't do it. If he thought of them as an enemy, he could do something no matter how cruel. ---Should have been able to. But with something he couldn't think of as anything other than human like himself, he couldn't intentionally hurt them. The internal instruction that it was something one must not do would stop him no matter what. All the more when the other had human form, and more so when it was one he knew, and even if it weren't somebody he had once been close with, he didn't think that he could intentionally injure them.

"You... You're soft on people, huh?"

"That's not the problem! I'm scared, for no reason. Something that scary, you think I can just do it?!"

Even if it had been Megumi he probably couldn't have done it. Quite possibly he wouldn't have been able to do it even to Motohashi Tsuruko. Natsuno's reason understood that Takatoshi had risen up but as expected he couldn't stab him there and then. ---It didn't come to mind. He didn't want to. He couldn't tolerate it, physiologically. He was unconditionally afraid. He ended up avoiding it.

He wasn't imagining it, he knew that it was how he truly felt. There was the fear of "the dead revived." A person he used to know, and one he liked---someone who when he died, he begged not to die, who he couldn't help but wish would come back, why would he raise a weapon to them? Setting aside if he'd hated them enough to want to kill them before, setting aside if the other had lost their personality and was simply nothing more than "a risen dead body."

If the other's personality lived on, the enemy was no longer an enemy. Since it was something beyond "a revived corpse," it would be certain to continue to follow him, and if so Natsuno could not become a hunter. And if he couldn't become a hunter, then sooner or later he could only become a victim.

Tohru put his hand to Natsuno's neck as he hung his head. He knew it was supposed to be a soothing gesture but that palm was as cool as the night air. He rested his head against the chest before him, and then he turned his ear towards it. There was no warmth, nor was there any sound. ---Nothingness haunted this body.

sinnesspiel

5

Pitch black darkness fell over the mountains. There was no moonlight to shine over the wood of the firs, nor did even the light of the stars reach the village. Tohru ran there as if to take refuge within that darkness. Following after him was a small figure.

"Did you not control him again? Why not!"

Tohru hurried up the slope keeping his silence. The child who followed after him snapped at him in a childishly high pitched voice from behind.

"I'm telling on you. Tatsumi-san's totally going to be mad at you! Then he's gonna have your place's Mom and Dad and your brother and sister brought to Yamairi!"

"……Natsuno won't say anything."

"How can you be sure enough to say that? You did it last night too. Even though I told you what to do that time too!"

Those who weren't used to hunting went together with one already used to it for a while. The one to put Tohru with Shizuka was Tatsumi. Shizuka was eleven, and from now on she would always be eleven. She looked young but she'd already had several times more victims than Tohru. She didn't seem particularly opposed to it. Rather, aware that despite being a child she was a hunter on par with the adults, she seemed to take a certain pride in it.

"I'm going through all the trouble to teach you like this. You've got to give them instructions or else, I said! You tell them to forget everything. Tell them it's a dream. If you don't, they'll do bad things

to you and spread it around."

It was because Shizuka conducted herself completely like a child, Tohru thought. Right was whatever the adults said was right. She was praised for attacking prey, and if she attacked prey well she'd be praised by the adults. That was a twisted part of Shizuka---but all the same, it created a set of solidified values with no room for hesitation. Shizuka did not hesitate to attack people. Rather she seemed to enjoy it as some kind of game.

"To put it another way, start telling them to do it or else! Tatsumsan's going to be mad about it. Even I got scolded! I was told to take care of you right or it was bad!"

Last night Tohru attacked Natsuno. In the attack lead he forgot to give instructions to the victim. Driven the sheer desire to leave, he put Natsuno back into his house and left the scene. Until meeting at the rendezvous point with Shizuka and asked if he did it right, he didn't realize how grave of a mistake he'd made.

"Right now I'm sure he's making a big mess! They'll get together and talk about taking you out. They totally are!"

"Natsuno won't talk. If he was going to tell, he'd have started yesterday. ... In the first place, when he does tell, nobody'll believe him."

"Can you say that for sure? It's you're fault we're in danger like this. Tomorrow it's gonna spread around. Everyone's gonna know. Knowing we're coming, they'll be waiting there with stakes. That's why I told you you have to do it right!"

Tohru kept silent. His feet moved faster. Shizuka trotted along with him, picking at him.

He understood the danger. During the attack last night it wasn't the case but tonight he intentionally didn't do it. He was against erasing someone's will and making them into human puppets. If he did that, he wasn't Natsuno anymore. Natsuno probably wouldn't say anything.

"I'm telling Tatsumi-san. I'm gonna have him bring the people from your home to Yamairi."

Tohru couldn't do anything but remain silent. ---That prison.

The holding cell for sacrifices. Taken from their houses, sacrifices gathered up just to be killed. That was something nobody wanted to put their families through.

"It's already done. I'll explain it to Tatsumi-san." Tohru kept his eyes cast down as he climbed the mountain, coming to the narrow mountain road. The car came from the south of the western mountain and picked up Tohru and Shizuka.

At some point they came to where the northern and western mountains met. There were groups of three to five people gathered from the village.

Nobody brought a light but they came following the narrow road without seeming to watch their footing too closely through the underbrush. There were some moving quietly on their own but there were also those moving together. Those were the ones exchanging words in cheerful tones. When going down the mountain nobody spoke. Within the village they only left the sound of the grass parting, like the fall of a secret wave. And yet when returning everyone was in high spirits as if released from a binding. But Tohru didn't feel that way in the slightest.

Tohru quickened his pace as if to escape people's gaze---as if to escape Shizuka's rebuking.

sinnesspiel

Links to Chapters

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No cultural notes this chapter!

I've had some requests for a text file of the translations to date and while I can provide one up to chapter 4, to be frank I don't want to get a lot of hard files into circulation until I've had a good chance to edit and adjust any translations I'm not happy with. So I'll probably slap a file up next full chapter update since it's requested, but for now I want to work on getting through the book since I've kind of slacked. At this rate I'll still make the deadline I set for myself but it could go a lot faster.

I think I can focus better on editing once the whole meat of the work's done and I know everything I'll be coming up against. Also, talks of chapters that come on each new chapter give me a lot of insight into how things are seen, so I may want to go back and re-edit for the best translation possible, so the more time and more discussion the better--and the best way to pass that time is more chapters translated, since it also generates talk that makes me reconsider a translation choice.

Also, for those who missed it, there was a Christmas update with an Ozaki/Seishin doujinshi dated on 12/25/2014!